Connections: Some Implications of Informal Communication Networks for Congregational Nurture

David B. Jackson

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COMMUNICATION NETWORKS FOR
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An Abstract of a Project/Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

David B. Jackson

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ABSTRACT

An integral part of the dynamics of congregational development is the quest for

deeper, maturer spiritual life. The biblical image of the church as a body conveys the

"oughtness" of such progress, growth being the sure sign of the presence of life. A

persistent question exists concerning the "how" of promoting that search.

The thesis of this project is that the discovery and diagramming of informal

communication networks within a church provides an effective avenue through which to

nurture the spiritual life of the members. These naturally occurring links between

congregants carry less resistance than do formal channels of association. Since this is so,

they can achieve a greater degree of effectiveness in nurturing genuine spiritual maturity.

The research consisted of a survey of the congregation using the "sociometric

technique." In this approach the individual is asked, "To whom do you talk?" in the

context of congregational associations. The resulting groups were then diagrammed as

network maps, showing graphically the current associations between members.

The result was that the church had an immediate identification of opinion leaders

and others who influence the flow of information throughout the congregation. They

could readily distinguish between those members who were connected with others in the

church and those who were isolated. The groups identified in this way are suggestive for

organizing ministries in the church.

The implications of this research are significant. By utilizing informal networks, a congregation can plan programs along lines that carry minimal resistance. As a result more of the attention of the groups can be devoted to the task at hand and to the maturing of spiritual life. This initial impression is confirmed by a specific case in the ministry context in which the research was conducted.

Abstract approved: _Paul N. Lakey_
Primary advisor

Charles A. Siburt
Secondary advisor

April 24, 1995
Date

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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

_____
Dean of the Graduate School

_____6-1-95_____
Date

Project/Thesis Committee

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Primary Advisor

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Secondary Advisor

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Reader

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CHAPTER I

PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

Study Setting: Meadowbrook Church of Christ

The Meadowbrook Church of Christ is located in Jackson, Mississippi. The city is

the state capital and is the largest city in the state, with a metro-area population of

305,000. Thus, for both political and commercial/economic reasons, Jackson attracts

much of the attention from other areas of the state. College graduates and young

executives, lawyers and political hopefuls, as well as the people needed to serve the

general population are all frequently attracted to the city more than other communities in

Mississippi.

The church's campus is located in Jackson's northeast section, which is mostly

white, middle-class, and growing. Meadowbrook has been at its present location since

1961, and the membership reflects the racial and socio-economic makeup of its

surroundings. Almost all of the members are white, well-educated, and have incomes that

would qualify as middle-class" or higher. They live either in this section of the city or in

nearby suburbs in two adjacent counties.

Earliest History

The church began in 1946 as the Central Church of Christ, located in the heart of

downtown Jackson. The congregation's genesis was a response to a perceived lack of progress and outreach in the only other Church of Christ in town. The principal impediment to growth was identified as an aging and unresponsive eldership. When those leaders resisted any challenge to their decisions, many of the members took steps which led to the formation of Central.

The choice of a location in the downtown area, with prominent Baptist and Methodist congregations close by, was guided by the congregation's desire to establish an identity in Jackson. The members wanted citizens of the community to understand the concept of an appeal to restore New Testament Christianity in the twentieth century. They intended for the city to know who the Church of Christ was.

Toward this end, the church sponsored a daily radio program in the early years. The theme of the program was "Jesus Christ, the hope of the world." As a result of the effort on radio, the name and voice of the first minister, Bonds Stocks, was widely recognized around the city. He was followed by Austin Siburt, who likewise made an impact on the city as a leader in a growing and influential church.

The first members also made a commitment to mission work, both within Mississippi and in areas outside the United States. Within the first year a Missions Committee was established, and potential sites for mission work were identified. Several of the members traveled outside of Jackson on Sundays to preach for small, rural churches which were without ministers. Meadowbrook was instrumental in either starting

or financially helping a number of churches, especially among the black communities in south-central Mississippi. The first foreign mission activity took place in Italy.

These earliest members were mostly young family groups with a good education and employment training. While the congregation stood solidly in the tradition of the Restoration Movement, the cultural context of the members helped to encourage an atmosphere which was open to change and innovation. Put in other words, this church was open to new ways of the praxis of faith. They were looking to the future, both personally and as a church. Their intention was to influence both their local community and the world through their following of Jesus Christ. All of these factors continue to be in evidence in the current makeup of Meadowbrook.[1]

Changing Location

After having given birth to a new congregation in the south of the city in 1956, the church began to plan for relocation. A place of priority was given to the future ministry of the church in Jackson. Since the active area of the city was northeast, property was acquired in that vicinity. Alonzo Welch, then minister at the Union Avenue church in Memphis, was interviewed for the position of pulpit minister in 1958. He discovered, in his words, "the most forward-looking group of the Lord's people I had ever seen." The

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[1] Although some written information is available, almost all of the descriptions of Meadowbrook's history included in this paper are based on a series of four panel discussions with members who participated in the events. The panels were based on Dale's suggested format [see Robert Dale, To Dream Again (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 40-42]. At the present time there are eight founding members who are still at Meadowbrook.

decision to move to the Meadowbrook Road area, which was considered to be "in the country" at the time, reflected sensitivity to growth dynamics in the city. Welch's experience and training reflected the dynamic personality of a church on the move.

New facilities were completed at the present site in 1961, and the location near Meadowbrook Road suggested a new name: Meadowbrook Church of Christ. The building program was suggested both by increasing numbers (the original location offered no opportunity for expansion) and by a changing center of activity in the city of Jackson. Residential growth had shifted to the northeast quadrant of the county and away from the established neighborhoods that had influenced the earlier location.

In its new location the church continued to grow along with the city. Mission efforts continued to have a prominent place in the planning of congregational efforts. In one period of four years, a new domestic or foreign missionary was added each year. The congregation also demonstrated sensitivity by responding to opportunities to relieve suffering in the community.

A major crisis in the life of the church erupted soon after the move. In a significant disagreement between the elders and the minister, all resigned. Although new elders were soon appointed, no permanent pulpit minister was hired for more than a year. A professor at Harding's Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, Dr. Richard Batey, commuted for eight or nine months and preached for the church.

Batey's tenure proved to be a time of maturing for the congregation. Many current members can still speak admiringly of sermons from Romans, wise counsel in the

selection of new elders, and a time of reestablishing a sense of priorities in the life of the church. Out of this time of crisis, the Meadowbrook Church drew a new resolve to serve the city through Christ.

The ministry of Jerry Porter (1964-1973) marked a long period of stability. His caring manner, both in the pulpit and in person, provided a needed time of healing in the church. Under his influence ministries were established that are vital to the outreach of the church to this day. Especially was this true in the opportunities to respond to the medical community in Jackson.

The University of Mississippi Medical Center was located nearby, giving easy access to the students there. During their time of training, many of these students worshipped at Meadowbrook. The church's membership also included several medical professionals, some of whom were on the faculty at University Hospital. In the mid-1970s a Bible study was held on the campus of UMC for medical students and staff.

Church members became aware of the needs presented by families of patients being treated in the University Medical Center. Often these families came from long distances, and they were faced with several days' stay in local motels. A group of members rented an apartment which families could use free of charge on a "first-come, first-served" basis. The ministry was eventually assumed by the church and has now been expanded to three apartments serving two large hospitals.

With the continuing interest in missions that had always been a primary concern at Meadowbrook, and the close involvement with the medical community, not

surprisingly the congregation became committed to medical missions. The membership provided personnel in medical and nursing students, as well as physicians and scientists. In the late 1970s, with Jerry Harvill in the pulpit (1976-1980), a major decision was made that the primary thrust for foreign missions at Meadowbrook would focus on medical missions.

A partnership was formed with Health Talents International, located in Birmingham, and two of Meadowbrook's members became members of the board of directors. HTI planned to build a medical missions training school in Guatemala. An initial group of teachers and students embarked in 1980. Unfortunately, guerrilla warfare in the region forced the evacuation of all Americans, thus making it necessary to close the school in 1981. However, the commitment to foreign medical missions was firmly established.

The Present Ministry/Minister

My association with Meadowbrook began in June 1982, when I assumed the responsibilities of pulpit minister. The church now employs three ministers, including a full-time youth minister and an associate minister. Eight men serve as elders, and there are sixteen deacons. Other leaders include sixteen couples who are captains and co-captains of eight Care Groups. These groups provide a structure for responding to members' needs within the congregation.

The current membership of four hundred fifty "baptized believers" reflects the congregation's story from the beginning in 1946, containing a higher-than-average number of well-educated individuals. In a recent "family survey," to which 180 adults responded, 50.3 per cent indicated that they were "professional/executive/ management" in employment. As to "highest level of education," 69.5 per cent responded that they had completed at least a college degree, with many holding advanced training.

Congregational Image

Although the other congregations in the area view Meadowbrook as the rich, professional church, the members' self-identity focuses on a very different picture. One suggested image is that of a responsive, caring church, especially in times of personal tragedy. A panel member in the group representing the current story of the congregation suggested that "people and caring relationships" are the most significant quality of life in the congregation at present.

Illustrations of this response to people in crisis are easy to cite. In 1979, on Easter Sunday, a large part of the Jackson area was flooded. Thousands of people lost everything in their homes as residential sections of the city were under eight feet of water. A dozen families at Meadowbrook were affected. The congregation rallied in support of these families with food, shelter, prayers, and concern. In the clean-up afterwards, members were organized into "teams" and helped with the cleaning and repair of homes, first within the church and later for those outside the church.

Tragedy struck two families in similar ways in 1984. In March, the twenty-year-old son of one of the elders was killed in a traffic accident. In October the eight-year-old son of a deacon was struck and killed by a tourbus. As the congregation responded to these families, filling their homes with loving ministry, the community observed and learned that Meadowbrook is especially effective in responding in times of crisis. Recently, at a church of "another fellowship" in the city, a Bible class discussion centered on the church's response to personal need. The teacher asked for a specific example. Someone in the class referred by name to the Meadowbrook Church of Christ, having observed the response firsthand.

The community recognizes this church as a church of action. A series of sixty-second radio spots has run for seven years in Jackson. In response to the stations' request for a uniform conclusion, each spot ends with "... the Meadowbrook Church of Christ, making a difference in Jackson." The phrase has also begun to shape members' self-image.

Myths and Symbols

When questioned about Meadowbrook's myths, rituals, and symbols, the "task force" chosen for consultation on this project responded with several suggestions. Their first suggestion was in connection with the radio sign-off, "making a difference in Jackson," mentioned above. The conviction that this church can influence the surrounding community is a dynamic idea and pertinent to many of the younger leaders in the

congregation. With training and resources above the average church, members believe that, with God's help, great things are possible.

A second symbol links the present with the past at Meadowbrook. A new sanctuary was occupied in 1989, and its distinctive architecture became symbolic in two ways. In the first, a new logo for church stationery incorporated the roofline of the large transcept windows. The line stands over a representation of a group of five stained glass windows which are arranged in the shape of a cross (see appendix 1).

The second part of this symbol provides the link with the past. The stained glass was donated to the church in memory of a former member who had died from cancer. He had been active in Christian service and in the community. His death was marked by a courageous faith and by characteristic concern for the needs of others above himself. Frequently now, as members worship, their gaze will fall on the windows, and they remember the faithful life and death of this Christian man.

A third suggestion demonstrates a historic concern for children which is ritualistically enacted in two annual events. Each spring the high school graduates are honored in a special Sunday night service, and they are presented with Bibles from the church. A meal follows, during which the students and their parents are honored guests, and a pictoral retrospective of each child is presented in slide form.

Every Christmas brings a visit from Santa Claus for the children who are younger than sixth grade. The Family Center is decorated with a tree; everyone enjoys a meal together; and then each child receives a present (supplied by the parents). One of the

members dresses as Santa; another is costumed as his elf-helper; and they call each child by name to come to the front and sit with Santa for a picture. Many parents (including several non-members) come with their cameras, the children are affirmed by the effort, and those who object to the mixing of secular and religious symbols have remained silent so far.

A final suggestion regards the planned focus on medical missions as a specific outreach of this church. The Missions Committee includes several physicians who are actively involved in the planning of the congregation's missions program. Many of these have traveled to missions sites at their own expense. Three of these doctors have served, or are serving now, as board members with Health Talents International. HTI serves as a planning and coordination group for medical missions among Churches of Christ. Meadowbrook continues to place the largest portion of mission funds in support of medical missions.

Context

The city of Jackson is a metropolitan area comprised of the adjacent corners of three counties. The Meadowbrook Church is situated on the frontage road of Interstate 55, which is the primary north-south traffic artery in the city. Residents of several outlying suburbs commute to work every day along this route. As Callahan indicates, this fact is the first consideration in determining the relative accessibility of a church site: "The best site for a church is one on the major traffic direction pattern within the area the

church plans to serve . . . ."[2] The building lies within the normal driving distance of a large portion of those who live within the metropolitan area.

With these considerations in mind, one can conclude that the ministry-area for Meadowbrook is definitely not neighborhood-oriented. The mission of the congregation is defined by a combination of factors. The interstate location is more prominent since changing location would be difficult to do. But when location is combined with the radio-outreach, and when the crisis-response reputation is added, the facts become clear that Meadowbrook is truly a regional church, with the potential of serving a wide-spread membership.[3]

Congregational Leadership

Meadowbrook's leaders have provided stable guidance for thirty years. The congregation recognizes the spiritual maturity of the elders and the willing, serving spirit of the deacons. These men show no indications of jealousy of position or power as they work within the congregation. If there is an area for study and change in the leadership, is in the assigning of decision-making authority to those outside the group of elders. The communication style preferences of the elders are all similar and are predominantly

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[2] Kennon L. Callahan, Twelve Keys to an Effective Church (San Fransisco: Harper, 1983), 72.

[3] See Meadowbrook's mission statement, Appendix 2.

"ISTJ" according to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The "Personal Profile System" (DiSC) would classify them as high "i" or "S" in every case. Their leadership style, which helps to create a sense of freedom and openness, has demonstrated flexibility and tolerance in most situations. However, by waiting for a "squeak" before responding to a situation, the elders are frequently slow to take action. The long-range view is lacking among this group.

In contrast, the deacons and many of the members are action-oriented people. The chairman of the deacons is a high "D" in personality. He is in a "take charge" occupation as an attorney and prefers to function in the same way as a deacon. The lack of timely response from the elders to proposals from the deacons and other program coordinators is a potential matter for conflict.

Problem and Purpose

The unity and cohesiveness of any church are continual goals and persistently difficult to achieve. This conclusion comes from a study of the instructions to the church in the New Testament, in which believers are urged to "maintain the unity of the Spirit" as they grow in their Christian faith. Such a view also results from the analogy of the church as the body of Christ. Without such togetherness a church cannot function effectively as an outpost of the Kingdom of Heaven. The continued growth and maturation of the members will be impeded to the extent that a nurturing environment is lacking within the congregation. The larger a church grows and the more diverse its membership, the greater the challenge of providing effective channels for congregational

nurture. Yeakley reports that when church size increases beyond two hundred members, the rate of involvement decreases in proportion to the rate of increase in membership.[4] One can expect increasing difficulty in creating a sense of belonging for all of the members as the congregation grows numerically.[5]

For several years the Meadowbrook church has pursued congregational nurture primarily through a system of "Care Groups." The plan calls for every member to be placed in an assigned group for one year. The primary purposes of these groups are nurturing relationships among the members and providing response to needs in times of illness or other crises. By changing groups each twelve months, the leaders hope to encourage nurture and involvement among the members.

The Care Group program has never involved more than half of the members at any one time. Organizers have tried both random groupings and geographical arrangements. Participation by some is irregular at best and non-existant by others. Some of the groups function well and are enthusiastic about their associations. Others struggle with low participation and support from members of the group.

The result is that some members are receiving great encouragement and others are receiving no nurture at all. Those who are actively involved in the weaker groups face

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[4] Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., Why Churches Grow (Arvada, CO: Christian Communications, Inc., 1979), 41.

[5] Lyle E. Schaller, Growing Plans (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983; reprint ed., 1989), 88.

burn-out from constantly shouldering the burden over an extended period of time. Attempted revisions in the design of the program have not solved these problems.

Those who are neglected in their spiritual nurture are most likely to become dropouts. The present system allows some members to drop out of all activities before the church is even aware that they are in danger. Members who are not involved in the mission of the church are the most reluctant to participate in the Care Group program. Under the present system those in greatest need of connecting with the spiritual life of the church are the least likely to be involved in the main nurture system which is available to meet that need.

A suggested solution to this dilemma comes from the field of organizational communications. This idea is based on the discovery that every association of people evolves a network of informal communications which operates alongside formal links. These informal relationships develop because of proximity, common interests, similar life situations, or other shared points of contact. They provide an efficient means of disseminating information and a powerful avenue for forming or changing opinions. Such groupings also furnish a means for friendship and mutual reinforcement of attitudes and activities.

In addition, because these networks are "emergent" rather than imposed from a higher authority, informal links provide a naturally-occurring means for congregational nurture. Church members who are already associating with one another will be most likely sources of help and encouragement for one another in times of difficulty. Casual

interactions within informal communication networks lend themselves to conversations about life's significant questions and struggles or to the admission of need in various life situations.

The purpose of this project/thesis will be to explore and identify the systems of informal communication networks which presently exist within the Meadowbrook Church of Christ in order to determine their possible roles in addressing the task of congregational nurturing. The main goal will be to identify communication links between members in order to make a graphic representation of "who talks to whom." These diagrams will suggest lines of organization for improving the efforts at congregational nurture.

The information provided by such a study will enable the congregational leadership to identify the "isolates," that is, those members who are disconnected from any informal network. A member with no connections in the congregation is a prime candidate for dropping out. After identifying those individuals, a church can design an intervention program to assist in the assimilation of members who are outside the nurture system.

Basic Assumptions

As a church grows larger, its members can easily feel neglected, disconnected, and lost in the crowd. The dynamics in a congregation of two hundred members are not the same as those for four hundred or a thousand members. The Meadowbrook Church of Christ has experienced these "growing pains," and the leadership recognizes the need for

significant change. They agree that attention must be given to planning for specific Christian nurture systems within the congregation. Various attempts have been made to achieve a system of nurturing relationships at Meadowbrook. The present structure of Care Groups is ineffective for at least half of the congregation. Many of those who do participate have expressed the desire for a more effective means of deepening relationships within the church.

Callahan observes that a congregation's response is more effective when it is organized around "the relational neighborhood" than when it conforms to the geographical distribution of the members.[6] This principle is at the heart of what the present project is designed to explore. Rather than imposing an organizational structure which is external and, at least to some extent, arbitrary in its arrangements, why not rely on relationships that evolve naturally within congregational life?

Informal communication networks provide the "relational neighborhood" within a church setting whereby real nurturing can occur. Although the present study will describe the concept of informal networks, this paper will assume the validity of the theory behind them. Theoretical support is available in studies from the field of organizational communication. Neither will the present effort include a test of the principle that a relational framework is more effective than others in facilitating spiritual nurture.

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[6] Callahan, 112.

The Meadowbrook Church of Christ will be the context of this study. The assumption is that what holds true for this congregation in addressing the challenge of congregational nurture will provide a model for such studies in other church settings as well. The point of interest is the relationship that exists between members, rather than the nature of the communications. Based on the exploration of informal networks, projections will be offered for a future application of these principles to a system of spiritual nurture within the congregation.

Definition of Important Terms

Congregational Nurture

For purposes of this study, "congregational nurture" refers to the efforts within a church-body to contribute to the spiritual growth and maturity of its members. The concept would include facets of membership assimilation and involvement. Specifically, congregational nurture describes the task of enabling Christians to "be transformed" from the image of the world in which we live into "the likeness of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). This activity of the church is vital because, as Johnson accurately states, in Christianity the "very intent is formation, not information."[7]

Informal Communication Network

The phrase "informal communication network" describes a group of individuals

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[7] Susanne Johnson, Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 103.

who

> form interpersonal relationships with other [members of the organization], creating a network of elationships that is much like the network which makes up their formal organization.[8]

Within this informal relationship individuals fill various roles. "Opinion leaders" are those who are sought out for their views and information. They are perceived as "informed sources of information" within a given context, rather than real shapers of opinion.[9] Other roles in informal networks are labeled as "gatekeeper," "liaison," or "bridge," but these are not significant to the purposes of the present study. The other role which is important for determining the implications of informal networks for spiritual nurture is known as an "isolate." Isolates are those "who have no links with other network members. . . . [They] are not in the network"[10]

Emergent

Informal networks gain much of their power from the fact that they are "emergent." This term denotes that, rather than being assigned or imposed as in formal organizational structure, these associations form naturally over time. Since they are informal, they must be used continuously, or they will cease to exist.[11]

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[8] Charles Conrad, Strategic Organizational Communication: Cultures, Situations, and Adaptations (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 78.

[9] B. Aubrey Fisher, Perspectives on Human Communication (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company Co., Inc., 1978), 133.

[10] Gerhard J. Hanneman and William J. McEwen, Communication and Behavior (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1975), 223n.

Network Map

A "network map" is a diagram of the communication links between people in a given organization. This graphic illustration can show associations "that connect time, space and communication," with the focus on "interactions between people."[12] In the present study only the fact of association will be explored since the purpose is to identify the existence of the networks.

Networks may take one of several forms, differentiated by the degree to which communication is centered in one person (the opinion leader). A "wheel" is the most-centralized, with almost every message passing through the same person at the "hub" of the network. A "circle" is less concentrated because each member shares in sending and receiving messages. Least-centralized of all network forms, the "chain" passes information from one member to the other in a predictable pattern without intervening contacts among the various members of the group.[13]

Sociometric Choice

The investigation in this research will attempt to identify the informal communication networks within the Meadowbrook Church of Christ based on the method of "sociometric choice." In this approach members are asked "to whom they go for

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[11] Conrad, 88.

[12] Seymour Hamilton, A Communication Audit HandBook: Helping Organizations Communicate (New York: Longman, 1987), 57.

[13] See Appendix 3 for representations of these network maps.

information and advice about a particular topic."[14] This method is particularly well-suited

for identifying opinion leaders and isolates because the focus is on discovering the

existence of the relationships themselves.

Potential Applications

The limits of the present project will be reached at the point of informal network

identification and description. Based on this information, however, recommendations will

be made for application to the challenge of congregational nurture. A specific example

will be cited from the experience of the Meadowbrook Church which attempted to apply

the theory of informal networks to a program of relationship-building.

A second potential application of this research is in the area of responding to the

problem of dropouts. Those members who are identified as isolates, although they may be

currently attending worship, are at greatest risk for dropping out. Knowing who is not

connected in any informal communication network will aid in addressing the problem of

"the back door" of church membership.

Another area of application, related to the discovery of isolates, is the concern

with member assimilation. Involved members are more likely to grow in faith and to be

satisfied in their spiritual life than those who merely attend. The level of membership

involvement is directly related to other facets of congregational life, such as giving and

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[14] Carley H. Dodd, Dynamics of Intercultural Communication (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1982; 3rd ed., 1991), 262.

outreach. Each of these concerns will be addressed in future studies at Meadowbrook, but those applications will not be a part of this project.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL SUPPORT AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In his challenging work on spiritual leadership in the church, Eugene Peterson deals with three functions: praying, reading Scripture, and giving spiritual direction. Even though these activities are unseen, they are vital to healthy spiritual development. He suggests that they are related to "pastoral" ministry in much the same way that the angles in a triangle are related to the sides. The sides are what one sees, but the angles actually determine the shape of the figure. Understanding the relationship of the unseen functions of spiritual leadership to the goal can improve the performance of the task.[1]

This stage of the present discussion consists of three parts, each essential in its own way to the application of the research to the task of a church's spiritual growth and development. The first section describes what is meant by "informal communication networks." Certain dynamics of this relationship are explored in order to lay a foundation for understanding how spiritual nurture may be enhanced when informal networks are identified and incorporated into the planning of a church's development.

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[1] Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 2-4.

The second of three elements is termed "congregational nurture." Even though individuals receive the focus in determining the existence of informal networks, the overall body is affected directly by the level of growth of the members. At an early stage the reader will understand that the term is complex. This presentation approaches congregational nurture both by way of definition and also with a view to application in individual and congregational development.

In the third section the idea of advocating congregational nurture through informal networks is supported by the consideration of God's intention for his church. Since the church exists as a result of his plan and providence, God must be consulted in charting any course for work in and with his church. Only methods of nurture which coincide with God's plan for his church are worth our time and attention.

Informal Communication Networks

The existence of informal communication networks was first identified by Chester Bernard, who studied them in a corporate context. The results of his research were published in 1938 in The Functions of the Executive, in which he noted that in addition to the formal contacts between those employed at all levels of a business, casual associations also occur among the employees as they go about their tasks. While these connections may not be characterized by any conscious purpose, they nevertheless influence individuals on multiple levels. Barnard found that this informal relationship "changes the experience, knowledge, attitudes, and emotions of the individuals

affected."[2] The term "informal organization" included all of the various ways in which individuals in a given work environment might come into contact with one another without having a predetermined purpose.

An important distinction was made between "purpose" and "result" in informal associations. By virtue of their being casual and unplanned, these relationships are excluded from having a set purpose. Yet, as Barnard observed, "Though common or joint purposes are excluded by definition, common or joint results of important character nevertheless come from such organization."[3]

Further Developments

One of the leading scholars currently researching the impact of informal networks is Everett Rogers. His work has concentrated on the impact of informal communication networks in the dissemination of new information within a specific population. Working in association with various colleagues, Rogers has served to bring definition and refinement to the studies initiated by Barnard.

Rogers defines informal groups as "small primary groups which are based on friendship and mutual interest."[4] The mutual interest may consist of having a similar job task, enjoying the same leisure activity, or simply coming into close physical proximity

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[2] The Functions of the Executive, with an Introduction by Kenneth R. Andrews, 30th Anniversary ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968; reprint ed., 1970), 114.

[3] Ibid., 115.

[4] Everett M. Rogers and Rabel J. Burdge, Social Change in Rural Societies, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972),106.

on a regular basis. The important element is that these are informal, casual groupings of individuals.

According to Rogers, the variety in the "basis of attraction" is reflected by a classification into three types of informal groups: Geographically-based networks are called "neighbors or locality groups." Those with family ties are "relatives or kinship groups." "Friendship or clique groups . . . are informal groups in which the basis of membership is common interest or friendship."[5]

Rogers has suggested that informal associations have a significant impact on the attitudes and behavior of a given population. "Informal organization . . . establishes certain attitudes, understandings, customs, habits, [and] institutions . . . ."[6] The importance of this observation is shown in the experience of various cultures. In the event of conflict between custom and law, the informally established custom will most likely prevail over the legislated statute.[7]

Such an observation does not imply, however, that an inherent antagonism exists between informal and formal arrangements. In actuality the possibility of group cooperation for a specific, formal goal is made more likely by "prior contact and preliminary interaction."[8] In practical terms, "informal networks provide the glue for

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Everett M. Rogers, with Lynne Svenning, Modernization Among Peasants: The Impact of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969), 116.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

member cohesiveness in organizations."[9]

The fact that the informal network is based on choice serves to give it an

important role in shaping attitudes. Rogers adds,

> Since the interactions of informal organization are not consciously dominated by a
> given impersonal objective or by authority as the organization expression, the
> interactions are apparently characterized by choice, and furnish the opportunities
> often for the reinforcement of personal attitudes.[10]

Refinement of the Theory

Comparison of Formal and Informal Networks

Informal networks occur spontaneously alongside formal organizational plans.

They exist in all levels of cultural development, whether a society is communal or

individualistic. Dodd recognizes the pervasive impact of informal associations:

> One cannot escape interpersonal communication input from peers, work
> associates, family and others. In one sense, every person we meet has some
> influence on our decisions, but all people do not exert equal amounts of
> influence.[11]

The makeup of these groups is practical rather than goal-oriented. Their impact is more

likely to be in areas of self-identity, self-respect, a sense of personal control, and feelings

of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.[12]

The contrast between formal and informal communication links is significant. As

channels of communication, informal associations are more efficient in the very situations

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[9] Hanneman and McEwen, 187.

[10] Modernization Among Peasants, 122.

[11] 256.

[12] Conrad, 78.

in which formal means are weakest. These would include times of crisis, in discussing

personal matters, and in dealing with information that is complex or detailed.[13]

Informal networks help to improve decision making within the organization.

Anxiety levels are reduced due to the informality of the contacts, thus lowering resistance

to expressing ideas.[14] Information tends to spread rapidly through informal channels.

Rogers found that such communications are richer in content than those received through

formal channels and tend to be very accurate.[15] Particularly when a new idea is under

discussion, communication by word-of-mouth has proven to be more significant than any

other form of packaging information.[16]

Characteristics of Informal Networks

Conrad lists two significant characteristics of informal networks.[17] The first is that

they are "emergent." That is, they spring spontaneously from the contacts among the

members, rather than having been imposed from the formal organizational hierarchy.

Informal groups "emerge" in response to the felt needs of the individuals involved.

The nature of an emergent group makes it inherently time-sensitive. Initially it

takes time for an informal network to become established. At the same time, if the

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[13] Ibid., 172.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 88, 90.

[16] Everett M. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 219.

[17] Conrad, 88-89.

relationships are not maintained, they will disappear. This observation means that any attempt to "map" the informal networks within any formal organization is, at best, accurate only for that moment in time. Rogers provides four principles which generally hold true regarding the durability of links between individuals in an informal communication network as compared with a formal organization:

1. Spatially proximate links are more stable.
2. Reciprocal links are more stable.
3. Homophilus links are more stable than heterophilus links.
4. Links representing ascribed [into which one is born], rather than achieved [earned], interpersonal relationships (such as kinship links) are more stable.[18]

The second characteristic of informal networks is that they are complex and may be overlapping. Depending on the nature of the relationship among the members, an individual could conceivably belong to more than one informal group at the same time. The possibility also exists that the formal and informal relationships may coincide.[19]

Network Maps and Important Definitions

A network map is a representation in diagram form of the individuals in an informal group, showing the communication links among them. By means of such charts, it is possible to show "time, space, and communication . . . [by] conversation, telephone call, letter or meeting of each person," should such information be desired.[20] The present study will include only the links among the members of the network without attempting

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[18] Everett M. Rogers and F. Shoemaker, Communication of Innovations, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1971), 316.

[19] Ibid., 89.

[20] Hamilton, 57.

to determine the relative strength of each relationship. In other words, the focus is limited to the "flow" of information, rather than including content or means of communication. In Hamilton's description such a view is similar to the "macro approach," although there was no attempt in this analysis to determine the number of contacts among members within each informal network.[21]

The shape of the map can be used to indicate the relative concentration of influence within the informal network.[22] For example, the "wheel" map, with the opinion leader at the center, reveals a highly centralized function for that member of the informal communication network. In contrast, the "circle" (a wheel with no individual occupying the center position) and the "chain" (all members in a side-by-side relationship without interactions among all individuals in the network) reflect very little centralization of function (see Appendix 3).

Opinion leaders and Isolates

In the process of determining the identity of informal groups, one finds that individuals occupy differing roles in the functioning of the network. For example, a "liaison" serves as a link between groups without being a member of any of them. A "gatekeeper" allows information to pass into or out of the group to which he or she belongs. Two of these identifiable roles are particularly relevant to this present study. Of key significance when studying the spread of information and associated feelings is the

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[21] Ibid., 61-62.

[22] Fisher, 129.

"opinion leader." Briefly described, "[Opinion leaders] provide information and advice about innovations to others."[23] These individuals tend to be sought out by other members of the community.

Early in the study of informal networks, anyone who was named as a source of information or who influenced attitudes toward a particular idea was designated as an opinion leader. By 1968, in a study of the presidential election of 1940, anyone who influenced at least three other people was identified as an opinion leader.[24] Current scholarship suggests that when an individual is indicated by five or more, then he or she is likely to be functioning in the role of opinion leader.[25]

An "isolate" is an individual within the larger community who does not belong to any informal network. A variation occurs when two isolates become linked with each other, but they have no relationship with others.[26] The ability to produce a network map makes possible the clear identification of members of a church who are not connected to the congregation in a meaningful way.

Techniques of Analysis

Three methods exist for discovering who the opinion leaders are and the informal communication networks which they represent.[27] The first is the sociometric technique

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[23] Everett M. Rogers, Social Change in Rural Societies, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 362.

[24] Dodd, 257.

[25] Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 214; see also Dodd, 264.

[26] Dodd, 265.

(described below). A second option is the key informant approach, in which certain individuals are asked who the opinion leaders are in their view. The third method is the self-designating technique, wherein the individual is asked directly whether members of the community seek his or her advice.

The sociometric approach asks "to whom do you talk" within the community under investigation. The present study utilizes this technique because it not only helps to identify opinion leaders, but also aids in the discovery of the other links in informal networks. As Dodd remarks,

> The chief advantage of the sociometric choice tech-nique is that it immediately taps interpersonal networks, providing the researcher with a complete profile of who respects whom.[28]

The principle disadvantage of this method is that it requires a response from the majority of the members of the subject community. Downs recommends a minimum response rate of 50 percent in order to avoid "all but the crudest statistical analyses."[29] This factor alone means that a sociometric analysis involves a greater amount of time than the other approaches.[30]

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[27] Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 228-229; see also Dodd, 262-264.

[28] Dodd, 263-264.

[29] Cal W. Downs, Communication Audits (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1988), 171.

[30] Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations, 228; see also Dodd, 264. (Such proved to be the case in the present project, but the other methods would not have produced the necessary information.)

Congregational Nurture

No one doubts that God's intention for his church is that it should continually grow toward maturity in Christ. Both explicit statements of scripture (Eph. 4:1-16; 2 Cor. 3:18) and the metaphor of the church as a living body support such a conclusion.[31] The goal is that we may "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13-16).

The "how" of spiritual maturity in the church is not so clear-cut, however. As contemporary American culture crowds into the church, even the definition of what spiritual maturity is may become uncertain. Some would fill the concept with any content whatever that deals with "the S words--soul, sacred, spiritual, sin."[32] In some instances the discipline of systematic thought is declared to be undesirable. As one young person was heard to say, "We don't have any theology; we just love the Lord."[33] Others may fail at communicating a specifically Christian content, raising a question about the church's intent. Still others fail to bring the biblical content to bear on questions of daily living. As one scholar complains about the current crisis, "We seem to be deliberately fostering yet another generation of biblically illiterate, theologically inept, and ethically shallow

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[31] See Lawrence O. Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke, Church Leadership: Following the Example of Jesus Christ, in Ministry Resources Library (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 45-53.

[32] Barbara Kantrowitz, Patricia King, Debra Rosenberg, Karen Springen, Pat Wingert, Tessa Namuth, and Trent Gegax, "In Search of the Sacred," Newsweek (November 28, 1994): 54.

[33] Perry G. Downs, Teaching for Spiritual Growth: An Introduction to Christian Education (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 59.

persons."[34] The deficiency in the moral conduct of church members who are not dedicated

to spiritual nurture is evident when their behavior is compared to the general population.

It is as if they expected the moment of their conversion to suffice for a lifetime, with no

further effort needed.

> We are a nation of the morally stillborn, or, at best, the morally retarded.
> The millions who say they are "born again" show little behavioral difference in
> regard to adultery, fornication, marital breakup, lying, tax evasion, and all the
> other sins rampant in our society.[35]

For the Christian faith, only specifically Christian content will produce Christian

spiritual growth. Yet the entire enterprise is an unknown proposition for many, if not

most, who profess to be followers of Jesus. Peterson compares the situation to a vast

unexplored continent in which only the shoreline is discovered.[36]Using a different

metaphor psychologist Scott Peck suggests that a minority of people choose this "road

less traveled." Difficult choices are required and a self-discipline which many find too

painful to pursue. But for those who seek this dimension of growth and maturity, a double

benefit results--the progression of both the individual and those affected by him or her:

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[34] Charles R. Foster, Teaching in the Community of Faith (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 13.

[35] James M. Houston, "The Independence Myth," Christianity Today 34 (January 15, 1990): 32.

[36] Eugene Peterson, Answering God (San Fransisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 2.

As we evolve as individuals, so do we cause our society to evolve. The culture . . . is nurtured by our leadership in adulthood. Those who achieve growth not only enjoy the fruits of growth but give the same fruits to the world.[37]

What is required in order that we might embark on this quest is that we must confess, as finite human creations of God, that we are always under development. We are not yet what we were intended to become, as the author of Hebrews reminds us.[38] When properly motivated,

> we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength. . . . There is more to being human than simply surviving; there is God . . . . We are unfinished creatures-- longing, reaching, stretching towards fulfillment.[39]

In recognizing that scripture uses a variety of terms to approximate what spiritual nurture is about--faith, maturity, holiness, proved, completion--we may now recommend a working definition.[40] From Downs' work in Christian education, the goal of spiritual maturity may be described in these words:

> . . . that people may learn to think Christianly about all matters of life. Having our minds renewed means learning to think in new ways, according to the teachings of Scripture, about all things so that we may "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).[41]

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[37] M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth (New York: Simon and Schuster; Touchstone Books, 1978), 267.

[38] Heb. 2:6-9.

[39] Peterson, Answering God, 3, 4.

[40] Lawrence O. Richards, A Practical Theology of Spirituality, Academie Books (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 21-32.

[41] 63.

The challenge lies in finding an effective means to encourage continuing progress toward spiritual development. The place of beginning is with the conviction that such maturity will not occur in isolation, as a purely personal and individual quest. The available testimony on this point is overwhelming. A professor of religious education confirms that "effective approaches to nurture must be formulated within the context of a worshiping congregation . . . ."[42] Downs agrees:

> No Christian can become mature alone. . . . Therefore, involvement in the body of Christ is not optional, but imperative. We must actively be involved with our local congregation if we are to grow spiritually.[43]

The concept of "congregational nurture" means that, just as physical growth and maturity require constant maintenance (food, training, medical care), even so the members of the church body must receive resources of a spiritual nature. This task is one of the two major roles of the church in the world, although Downs terms it "the central task" of the church.[44] The other focus of the church's purpose, that of representing the person of Christ in the world by evangelizing the lost and healing the poor and hurting, is significantly enhanced as the pursuit of spiritual maturity bears fruit.

Identifying the Problem

In view of the fact that congregational nurture is a dynamic process, one would never envision spiritual development as anything other than a lifelong goal.

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[42] G. Temp Sparkman, The Salvation and Nurture of the Child of God: The Story of Emma (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1983), 16.

[43] 149.

[44] Ibid., 198.

"Developmentalism" is the label suggested by Downs to capture this living, vital sense of

spiritual growth. [45] Sparkman likens it to embarking on a journey:

> If we act in faith, then we set ourselves consciously on a journey which had its beginning long before we were aware; in short, we allow God to work in transforming our lives. . . . Christian nurture is nothing less than working with this process of salvation.[46]

When the church recognizes that a Christian never "arrives" at a place of total spiritual

development, we are ready to understand the process of spiritual maturation as

> living up to the capacities God has made possible for you. . . . A mature person is one who is using his or her spiritual gifts, who is building up the body, who is discerning truth from error, who is speaking the truth in love, who is in God-honoring relationships with people. . . . Maturity is pressing toward the mark; immaturity is complacency and self- satisfaction.[47]

Another way to understand this view of the developing spiritual life is by the term

"spiritual direction," defined as "the care and cure of souls."[48] Instead of defining growth

in biological and social categories, we seek a "gradual transformation . . . into the more

remarkable phenomenon of self as spirit."[49] Spiritual direction is the attempt to help a

person respond faithfully to whatever God is doing in his or her life.[50]

> "Spiritual direction is as ready to spot God in the supermarket as in the pew. . . . The biblical use of the word spiritual refers to the work of God in which we participate, and which includes and integrates all of life. . . . One of the characteristics of spiritual direction is to "get out of the way," to be unimportant.

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[45] Ibid., 69.

[46] Sparkman, 31.

[47] Marshall Shelly and Larry Weeden, "Can Spiritual Maturity Be Taught? An Interview with Roberta Hestenes," Leadership 9 (Fall 1988): 14.

[48] Johnson, 18.

[49] Ibid., 111.

[50] Peterson, Working the Angles, 103.

A paradox is in operation here: to be <u>really</u> present without being <u>obtrusively</u> present.[51]

The promise of Scripture is that the Lord equips every person in his church with gifts needed to carry on its work. The specific concern of spiritual guidance is with the discovery and development of these gifts.[52] Peterson suggests that three assumptions are included in the concept:

> (1) God is always doing something: an active grace is shaping this life into mature salvation; (2) responding to God is not sheer guesswork: the Christian community has acquired wisdom through the centuries that provides guidance; (3) each soul is unique: no wisdom can simply be applied without discerning the particulars of this life, this situation.[53]

A Network of Inclusion

The encouraging fact is that every Christian can promote the pursuit of maturity or spiritual direction in the church. As each one becomes committed to the personal effort to follow God's lead, he or she is able to encourage others with whom meaningful relationships have been formed to do the same. Peterson observes, "Most spiritual direction takes place spontaneously and informally in unplanned but 'just right' moments."[54]

Johnson affirms the practical nature of spiritual direction as it occurs in the context of congregational life:

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[51] Eugene H. Peterson, "The Summer of My Discontent," <u>Christianity Today</u> 34 (January 15, 1990): 30.

[52] Johnson, 131.

[53] <u>Working the Angles</u>, 104.

[54] <u>Ibid.</u>, 111.

Powerful modes of Christian formation include the informal and often unconscious appropriation of the beliefs, affections, and actions of what a Christian is and what a Christian does. The congregation is where we encounter people who know something already of negotiating a Christian life. . . . We learn what it means to follow Christ mainly through watching how other believers from many times, places, and circumstances have followed.[55]

This "hermeneutic of participation"[56] finds strength in the potential inclusion of every member of the congregation in an informal network of meaningful relationships. Ellas styles them as "heart-to-heart" groups.[57] Callahan recommends intentionally structuring growth efforts along "the natural relational neighborhood in which persons in the community already live . . . ."[58] The most obvious reason for this is that "people discover people in significant relational groups . . . ."[59] Churches must consciously structure programs in which "newcomers are identified, cared for, and integrated into the fabric of the church."[60] As the sense of belonging and trust deepen among the members, a necessary feeling of cohesion, of "we-ness" begins to emerge.[61] Individual maturity takes place simultaneously with the growth of the whole body.[62] This mutual development

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[55] 124-125.

[56] Ibid., 13; see also 159.

[57] John W. Ellas, Church Growth Through Groups: Strategies for Varying Levels of Christian Community (Searcy: Resource Publications, 1990), 61.

[58] 39.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Calvin C. Ratz, "The Velcro Church," Leadership 11 (Fall 1990): 44.

[61] Em Griffin, Getting Together: A Guide for Good Groups (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1982), 16.

occurs in what Foster terms a "process of reciprocity."[63] For Schaller, "it is difficult to overstate the role of these face-to-face groups in reaching, attracting, and assimilating new members."[64] For those who are well-connected in a network of friends, the relationships will be more likely to progress toward a richer, deeper, and more meaningful sense of spiritual nurture. The assumption is that each individual member who appears on a network map is in such an environment of spiritual growth.

The role of the "opinion leader" is of vital importance for the development of each member of his or her network. Since by definition attitudes and ideas are influenced by this one person more than the others, congregational leadership should be encouraged to include the opinion leader in their channels of communication throughout the congregation. In this way the identification of the "unofficial" leaders becomes a valuable tool in promoting the spiritual maturation of the whole church.

In each case of weak attachment, however, the very lack of participation works directly against the goal of growth and maturity. At this point the "network maps" again provide valuable assistance. By means of the information provided from the study of informal communication networks within a church-body, a critical distinction can be made between two groups. Members who are isolated can be distinguished from those who are, at the very least, in an environment of nurture.

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[62] Downs, 199.

[63] 35.

[64] Growing Plans, 96.

The "unattached" members need very specific intervention from church leaders. These "isolates" are in danger of dying spiritually and becoming separated from the church. As Yeakley remarks,

> when subjects formed personal relationships with members of the congregation, they were likely to remain faithful. When they did not form such personal relationships, they were likely to drop out of the church.[65]

The Danger of Isolation

Meaningful relationships are directly related to the level of participation in congregational life. Schaller emphasizes the point when he observes that

> adult new members who do not become part of a group, accept a leadership role, or become involved in a task during their first year tend to become inactive.[66]

Heck reduces the critical period to six months.[67]

In a summary of three research projects, Arn reports these significant observations:

1. A high correlation between the number of good friends one has among church members and the level of participation in the life of that church;
2. When new members average over seven new friends within the church during the first six months they are likely to stay, but having fewer than two friends produces a tendency toward dropping out;
3. Those who have dropped out often indicate "friendliness of the people" as a significant factor in their ecision to affiliate with or leave a church.[68]

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[65] 54.

[66] Lyle E. Schaller, Assimilating New Members, Creative Leadership Series (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978; reprint, 1978), 77.

[67] Joel D. Heck, New Member Assimilation: Practical Prevention of Backdoor Loss Through Frontdoor Care (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988), 17.

[68] Win Arn, The Win Arn Growth Report (Pasadena, CA: The Institute for American Church Growth, no. 8 [1985]), 4.

A commonly-accepted and understood principle of all human activities seems to be that "most people live, think, function, and act in terms of relationships."[69] In view of the general agreement on this point, the fact that "at least one third . . . of all Protestant church members do not feel a sense of belonging to the congregation of which they are members"[70] is astonishing. Heck cites one new Christian who found himself in an unaffirming church. "It was like putting a baby in the arms of a corpse."[71]

If the congregation in fact nurtures its members as a by-product of all its activities--worship, instruction, and practice[72]--then active participation in all of those avenues of spiritual life is vital for continuing maturity. Whatever the emphasis in the personality of the church may be, the goal is still helping members toward maturing in the faith[73]. The church dare not become comfortable when "we look more like alumni or alumnae associations than faith communities."[74] Instead, the "one another-ness" of the

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[69] Schaller, Assimilating New Members, 113.

[70] Ibid., 16.

[71] 19.

[72] Johnson, 143-155.

[73] For a characterization of congregational styles based on points of emphasis, see Jim Abrahamson, "In Search of the Effective Church," Leadership 11 (Fall 1990): 52-59. His four types are (1) "The Reaching-out (Market-driven) Church;" (2) "The Reaching-in (Relational) Church;" (3) "The Reaching-up (Worship-centered) Church;" and (4) "The Handing-down (Bible-teaching) Church."

[74] Wade Clark Roof, "The Church in the Centrifuge," Christian Century 106 (November 8, 1989): 1013.

nature of church membership must become the conscious ideal of the whole

congregation.

Church as Community

One of the most popular shows on television in the late 1980s and early 1990s

was a comedy called "Cheers." Each week the story revolved around the lives of people

who worked in or patronized a small neighborhood bar. The theme song for this program

captured the essence of the life search of contemporary America:

> Making your way in the world today
> takes everything you've got.
> Taking a break from all your worries
> sure would help a lot.
> Wouldn't you like to get away?
>
> Sometimes you wanna go
> where everybody knows your name,
> and they're always glad you came.
> You wanna be where you can see
> our troubles are all the same.
> You wanna go where everybody knows your name.[75]

The problem is that many people are searching for meaning, but they have no idea

how or where to look. In this postmodern era hope no longer resides in the supposed

saviors of the past. The "war to end all wars" did not, and unbounded optimism regarding

human progress has proven ill-founded. Technology has no final answers, and the

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[75] Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo, "Theme from Cheers," quoted in James Hinkle and Tim Woodroof, Among Friends: You Can Help Make Your Church a Warmer Place (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1989), 39-40.

unleashing of the power of nature has been revealed as the source of more problems than solutions. Nouwen has put the case well:

> In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found. . . . It is . . . obligatory for Christians to offer an open and hospitable space where strangers can cast off their strangeness and become our fellow human beings.[76]

The church must come to see itself as "community," as people dedicated to "a covenantal way of life,"[77] in stark contrast to the American culture's emphasis on rugged individualism. We are a "colony of heaven," with values that mark a distinct difference from the surrounding culture.[78] In this context "community" has the meaning described by Peck:

> . . . a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to "rejoice together, mourn together," and to "delight in each other, make each other's condition their own."[79]

Churches ought, as a natural response to who and what they are, to extend a healthy sense of community to individual members, to create a sense of belonging. Peck reports, however, that current experience demonstrates a telling lack of such support. Frequently when an audience member approaches him for a private conversation after a

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[76] Henri J. M. Nouwen, Reaching Out (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975), 46.

[77] Johnson, 47.

[78] See Chapter 4, "Life in the Colony: The Church as Basis for Christian Ethics," Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989; reprinted., 1990), 69-92.

[79] The Different Drum, 59.

lecture, that person will explain, "I can't ask it in the group because some of the members of my church are here."[80] Such comments reveal an attitude of exclusion that is based on an "inorganic model" of the church and a "balloon theory" of doctrine.[81] An inflexible institution requires only one theological objection as the basis for expulsion from the fellowship. In this situation a member can never find the security of belonging and acceptance which is vital in order for true spiritual nurture to occur.

In the church, therefore, we must cultivate a sense of community resting on commitment ("the willingness to coexist"), the acceptance of individual differences, and the humility to appreciate both others' gifts and our own limitations.[82] Griffin suggests that the essence of Christian association hinges on this atmosphere of belonging:

> Others can afford to see closeness as a luxury--a nice add-on, but secondary to the main task at hand. For the church, however, intimacy isn't an option. Jesus commanded his followers to love one another. Call it what you will--closeness, fellowship, cohesiveness, koinonia--that's what the family of God is about.[83]

While each of these elements runs counter to natural human inclinations, in the church the Spirit is working with those who are being transformed. Willimon provides a clear distinction:

> In the world, what often passes for reality is dog-eat-dog, survival of the fittest, look out for number one, do your own thing, and the devil take the

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[80] Ibid., 57.

[81] C. Leonard Allen, The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World (Abilene: ACU Press, 1990), 31. For a discussion of the significance of following an "organic" model for the church, see Richards and Hoeldtke, Church Leadership, 33-36.

[82] Richards and Hoeldtke, 62-65.

[83] "How to Gauge the Closeness of a Group," Leadership 5 (Fall 1984): 84.

hindmost. But in the church, things will be viewed differently. Here, strangers become relatives; the weak are cherished; those who do not fit into the world's standards of value are baptized; and the poor are royalty.[84]

Since it is God's Spirit that is at work, the community thus formed will have an other-worldly character even while it remains in the world. This different perspective exists because, as Allen reminds us, the Spirit directs the church to focus on the cross, and to be formed by it. In this way life comes more and more to be characterized by the "fruit of the Spirit." The Spirit of God grows within us certain unnatural traits: "the strength to follow the way of weakness, the power to receive and care for the powerless, the peace to endure and absorb hostility."[85]

A part of the intention of spiritual direction is to realize this meaningful relationship with each other. Then, as Mead suggests, the church will bring "good news" to our culture. We will be

> . . . communities that live good news, that turn out bearers of good news; congregations that are good news to be part of; communities that are deeply responsive to all kinds of needs, that are able to recognize the infinite kinds of hurt and pain that we are called to address; communities that respect and honor the personal and group boundaries by which we secure our identities. Our congregations are called to be communities that follow Jesus in bringing good news to the pain of the world.[86]

The character of life in "community" is vastly different from that which one experiences elsewhere. It is truly counter-cultural. Mead lists ten qualities of relationships

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[84] William H. Willimon, What's Right with the Church (San Fransisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 65-66.

[85] Allen, The Cruciform Church, 163; see also Richards and Hoeldtke, Church Leadership, 75-81.

[86] Loren B. Mead, Transforming Congregations for the Future, Once and Future Church Series (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 1994), 31.

that are experienced in community:

1. "Strangers meet on common ground . . . ."
2. "Fear of the stranger is faced and dealt with . . . ."
3. "Scarce resources are shared and abundance is generated . . . ."
4. "Conflict occurs and is resolved . . . ."
5. "Life is given color, texture, drama, a festive air . . . ."
6. "People are drawn out of themselves . . . ."
7. "Mutual responsibility becomes evident and mutual aid possible . . . ."
8. "Opinions become . . . accountable . . . ."
9. "Vision is projected and projects are attempted . . . ."
10. "People are empowered and protected against power . . . ."[87]

Recognizing that contemporary American culture offers multiple options for the spiritual journey, the church must be intentional about forming communities that are specifically Christian. The "cafeteria approach" which allows a pick-and-choose attitude in spiritual choices presents an additional challenge to the church. The challenge has never been more urgent than it is at the end of the twentieth century:

> We must clarify what makes us different, so that we can undertake our vocation. . . . This requires us to establish the authenticity and distinctiveness of our congregations so that we live visibly in our faith, shaped by the biblical heritage, not by the least common denominator of local values and morality. We must build congregations where people know and follow Jesus, not the latest polls.[88]

The church should find no joy in our difficulty in realizing that we are to be communities of good news. How could it be that the words of a song about relationships discovered in a bar more nearly describe the need of the human soul than the rationale for much of church activity in the recent past? We have almost lost our way.

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[87] Ibid., 48-52.

[88] Ibid., 115; see also Richards, A Practical Theology of Spirituality, 11-18.

The longings of this age cry out for an incisive response from the church. In a "stressed-out and graceless world where it is seldom safe to fail," Abrahamson pictures a relaxed atmosphere in which people feel "safe to fail because they [are] surrounded by family."[89] Can the church be this place? Using another image, Savage suggests that the church must scrape away the "Teflon" coating that keeps people at a distance. By acknowledging to wounded people that the church, too, struggles with pain, we can establish an attraction for those who are struggling to find their way in a difficult world. Otherwise we are flirting with our own version of the Pharisees' whitewash.[90]

In response to this need, the groupings formed from emergent informal communication networks suggest an effective avenue of response. By intentionally giving nurturing, community-building roles to these naturally-occurring groups, the church can tap a powerful resource for addressing an essential need of individuals in our society. This proposal provides a direct answer to the call for effective small groups in the church, a need expressed by Allen as the first suggestion in making the church into God's "new social order."[91]

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[89] Abrahamson, 55.

[90] John S. Savage, "The Teflon Church," Leadership 11 (Fall 1990): 35-36.

[91] Allen, The Cruciform Church, 169.

Theological Foundations

A Sovereign God

In the beginning, when God created all things, he already had planned the full

scope of the good news about human salvation. "Before the creation of the world," he was

preparing for a people who would "be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4).

"Before the beginning of time," the God who cannot lie promised eternal life through his

Son (2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:3). His great "mystery" for bringing all people together was

guarded until everything was ready. With confidence all Christians can confess "that

now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known . . ."

(Eph. 3:10).

The church's existence is not due to an accident of history, nor to the heroism of

apostles and martyrs, and certainly not to the dedication of those who wear the name

"Christian." Neither does the future survival of the church depend on our efforts. Human

beings, no matter how well-intentioned and faithful, cannot be credited with so much

significance. In truth the church is God's creation.[92] Nouwen recognizes that only in

responding to the call of this sovereign God can the church properly understand its unique

role in the world:

> The basis of the Christian community is not the family tie, or social or
> economic equality, or shared oppression or complaint, or mutual attraction . . . but

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[92] See especially the case for a renewed emphasis on God's transcendence in the Restoration Movement presented in C. Leonard Allen, Richard T. Hughes, and Michael R. Weed, The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), 3-9, 17-21, 71-81.

the divine call. The Christian community is not the result of human efforts. God has made us into his people by calling us out of "Egypt" to the "New Land," . . . out of slavery to freedom, . . .[93]

When the time was right, God brought the church into existence. While human actions and decisions can exert influence for good or ill, the ultimate state of the church rests with the sovereign God. Oden is right in his comment on 2 Timothy 2:2:

> There is good reason to resist the alarming notion that the gospel is always only one generation away from destruction. For it is God and not our own educational efforts who finally ensures the continuity of the Christian tradition.[94]

God has planned and bought his church into existence. As we become a part of it, we are caught up into the life of God's people together. Very clearly God intends the members of his church to continue to progress, to grow spiritually throughout their lives.

In an age of anthropocentric assumptions, when natural law and material abundance dominate the limits of reality, the Christian community must re-establish the reality of a sovereign God and his continuing work in the church. This central concept is essential for what Allen calls the "desecularization of the church."

> Desecularization of the church, therefore, cannot proceed without raising, at the most fundamental level, the question of God. We must ask: How is idolatry possible today? Do we not often create God in our image? . . . So we must grapple again with God. If secularization means a loss of transcendence, a reduction of God's majesty and mystery, then we must focus again on the living God as revealed in Scripture.[95]

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[93] Nouwen, 110.

[94] Thomas C. Oden, First and Second Timothy and Titus, in Interpretation, James L. Mays, ed. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 162.

[95] Allen, The Cruciform Church, 82-83.

Instructed for Growth

A Living Body

Not only does the New Testament assume that the Christian life will be one of continual growth, but many texts teach the idea explicitly, using both positive and negative motivation. Positively, both individual Christians and the whole church together are instructed to pursue a transformation from worldly to heavenly ideals. Negatively, warnings about the results of failure to grow in the spiritual realm are equally consistent and convincing.

In Ephesians, a letter written specifically with the role of the church at the forefront, Paul centers on the image of the church as Christ's body (1:23; 4:25). The progress of spiritual development is expressed in his prayer for his recipients, that they may "know him better" (1:17) and that they "may be enlightened" (1:18). He affirms that they are under construction "to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (2:22).

The most vivid expression in Ephesians, however, of the figure of growth of the body is in Paul's discussion of the goal for which Christ has placed gifts in the church (4:11-16). The divine purpose is that we might "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:13). Every member can "grow up" (4:15), find stability, and with the Lord's assistance the whole body "grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (4:16).

Paul's use of the body image in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 adds nothing new, but reinforces the concept of mutual responsibility in the overall progress of the church maturing as the body of Christ. While we live as one body, no conflict occurs by the best use of each individual gift which God has given, since "each member belongs to all the others" (Rom. 12:5). This condition is true because no one member can perform the tasks of all; because all were baptized by one Spirit; and because, in the end, "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Cor. 12:14-20, 13, 18).

Other writers likewise speak of the Christian life as one of continual progress and growth. Peter specifies a list of qualities that we should add to our faith (2 Pet. 1:5-8), and he concludes the same letter with a reminder to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18). The anonymous author of Hebrews encourages disciples to "leave the elementary teachings" in order to "go on to maturity" (6:1).

Warnings from Failure to Grow

Negatively, warnings about the dangers of failing to grow provide other insights into the nature of spiritual development. While it is true that Jesus instructed his followers to become as little children in their attitude toward the kingdom (Mk. 10:13-16), in the area of spiritual growth there is no blessing in remaining as an infant. Spiritual babies cannot handle spiritual teaching because they are worldly (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Christians are commanded to "stop thinking like children," and instead to use reasoning appropriate for

adults (1 Cor. 14:20). When Christians do become maturer, they, like Paul, "put childish ways behind" themselves (1 Cor. 13:11).

To persist in a stage of spiritual immaturity is to be in a perpetual state of uncertainty, never gaining confidence in any spiritual matters. The analogy of storm-tossed waves provides a vivid picture of such a state (Eph. 4:14). Such a person has no defense against "the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (v. 14b).

The author of Hebrews warns that failure to progress in matters of faith leads to the necessity of beginning all over again (5:12). Such a condition is the result of lacking spiritual exercise and training, the only path to maturity (v. 14). The ultimate danger of persistent immaturity is that of falling out of the spiritual life altogether, in which case a return to repentance is impossible (6:4-6). The guilt is the same as recrucifying Christ and thus publicly shaming him yet again (v. 6b).

Benefits for Strong and Weak

Realizing the importance of continually nurturing the spiritual elements of life can have positive results for both the spiritually "strong" and those who feel discouraged. For those with an active faith, it should serve as a source of genuine humility. The attempt at ranking comparative levels of "perfection," and accompanying feelings of superiority, is completely foreign to the proper spirit of nurturing in the church. As one author has

observed, "This side of heaven there will always be more ground to be possessed, and people who imagine otherwise may be in a rut and may have been there for years."[96]

At the same time the struggling Christian should take heart. Spiritual development is a gradual process, with patience and perseverance as keys to success. Faith and love are especially emphasized in Scripture as areas in which Christians are urged to grow.[97] The future is filled with the hope of better things in the positive, nurturing environment ideally provided by the church.

Children Resemble Their Parents

The goal toward which individual Christian growth is directed by the Spirit, and therefore that toward which the church aims, is described in Scripture as "the likeness of his Son," or "the image of Christ."[98] The rebirth which is Christian conversion makes possible a new approach to life.[99] This new way of living in the world resembles that of Jesus when he was on the earth. We learn to imitate his life as Scripture instructs that we should do.[100]

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[96] Kenneth Prior, The Way of Holiness, rev. ed. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1982), 87.

[97] Ibid., 87-90.

[98] Rom. 8:28; 2 Cor. 3:18.

[99] Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10.

[100] Mk. 10:43-45; Jn. 13:12-17; Rom. 15:3; 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:21.

As Christians we do not transform ourselves, but we are <u>being transformed</u> by a creative power which lies outside the material, physical world. The distinction could not be greater: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world," urges Paul, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). When we initiate our direction, we will come to resemble "the pattern of this world." But when we are recipients, being transformed by divine guidance, we look more like the Son, who "is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Heb. 2:11).

In this way individual growth and membership in a nurturing organism, or community, are completely compatible. One might even say they are essential to each other.[101] For example, Paul's invitation to imitate himself as he was following Christ carries a community orientation, as illustrated by Fowl:

> The guiding theme of this whole paragraph [1 Cor. 10:23-11:1] . . . is contained in the notion of "building up" the body of Christ . . . through seeking the advantage of others rather than one's own advantage. . . . For the Corinthians to imitate Paul as he imitates Christ, the one who calls the community into being and who sustains it (1 Cor. 1:30), they will need to dedicate themselves to the task of building up the body. In terms of concrete action this imitation demands that the Corinthians seek the well-being of others rather than their own.[102]

In a similar vein of thought Richards says,

> . . . Jesus . . . continues to teach his people through the Holy Spirit who lives within us. In the new process, each believer is gifted by the Spirit with a spiritual gift which enables him or her to contribute to others, and in the context

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[101] For a discussion of the difficulty in bridging this connection, see Roy M. Oswald and Speed B. Leas, <u>The Inviting Church: a Study of New Member Assimilation</u> (Washington: The Alban Institute, 1987; reprint ed., 1993), 70-77.

[102] "Imitation of Paul/of Christ," in <u>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</u>, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 429.

of a loving community, each spurs the others on to full commitment to Jesus Christ.

       The transformational goal of discipleship has never changed, nor has the challenge of discipleship to reject the old in favor of doing God's will, even when his will can be characterized as a daily cross. . . . The new process, which facilitates Christian transformation, depends on the vitality of the family and body relationships experienced by those [who] follow Jesus Christ together.[103]

For these reasons, therefore, the discovery of informal networks that already exist in a congregation suggests a naturally-occurring resource which may enable the church to become the church. That is to say, as a congregation faces the task of providing for the spiritual nurture of individual members, the recognition of informal groups can become an aid to accomplishing this objective. Specifically, when Christians face the task of spiritual growth, or congregational nurture, these voluntary groupings provide a ready-made avenue for building the feelings of community that are vital in helping members build a sense of covenant and Christian identity. The present study has been conducted with this purpose in view.

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[103] A Practical Theology of Spirituality, 229.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The need to develop a healthy spiritual life within congregational experience has

been widely recognized for generations. No one doubts that the church as the body of

Christ is intended to mature toward the fullness of Christ himself. General agreement

exists that individual Christians never arrive at a resting place, but that the quest for

spiritual maturity is a life-long process.

In addition, a large volume of literature has been produced which deals with the

problem of "the back door." Members regularly disappear from the group of those who

actively participate and support the various activities of the congregation. An effective

means for identifying those who are most likely to drop out would help in organizing

some means of intervention.

The thesis of this project is that informal communication networks already

existing within the congregation provide a ready means for addressing these problems of

church life. If building a sense of belonging encourages active participation (see above,

pages 45-46), then a priority should be given to building relationships within the church.

Richards and Hoeldtke concur:

> The key to body communications is building relationships among people rather
> than setting up structures. . . . The really critical communications issue . . . focuses
> on building interpersonal networks.

. . . We want each member of the body to have at least one and preferably several fellow believers with whom he has significant personal sharing experiences on a regular basis and whom he or she consistently supports with encouragement and prayer.[1]

The same authors recommend informal associations as being most effective in achieving the goal of nurture and a sense of belonging.[2] These networks can exist alongside formal groups, and they will act as support for other activities of church life (see discussion on formal and informal groups, pp. 28-29). The end result will be continuous spiritual formation as a sense of belonging, and a commitment to community will pervade the membership.

Who Talks to Whom

The first task in the project was to understand the nature and function of informal communication networks. From the field of organizational communication the research of Rogers, Dodd, and Conrad proved particularly helpful. The same dynamics of informal networks that function in a business or anthropological setting were assumed to be valid in congregational life.

The concept of informal communication networks is almost self-evident once the idea is explained. This fact helped to simplify the task of explaining the purpose of this study to the congregation. Everyone was aware that casual associations of people within the church family existed. The Meadowbrook Church has had a "bridge clique" for many

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[1] Richards and Hoeldtke, 338.

[2] Ibid., 339.

years, and the card game has become the basis for longterm friendships. A group of men plays tennis once a week, and they have come to rely on each other in times of personal need as well.

The members of the Meadowbrook Church of Christ were initially involved in this project by means of a request that they report on "who talks to whom" within the church. According to informal network theory, three options were available for obtaining this information: sociometric choice, the key informant approach, and self-designation (see discussion above, p. 34). Sociometric choice was utilized because of the desire to chart the actual informal networks, as well as to identify opinion leaders and isolates.

The procedure involved the distribution of a questionnaire asking the members to reflect on their usual conversations during the past twelve months (Appendix 4). Suggested areas of communication were times of seeking advice, obtaining news of church events, or planning and attending social activities. The goal, to obtain input from most of the members, is essential in order for the results of sociometric choice to provide useful information.[3]

During the first few weeks only 25 percent of the members responded to the request for information. Since a response rate below 50 percent was unacceptable, other means for obtaining the information were utilized. Direct, personal requests produced responses from another 20 percent of the members. On two occasions questionnaires were mailed to non-responders, resulting in an additional 20 percent. Finally, telephone

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[3] See comments from Downs, above, p. 35.

interviews completed the collection of answers to the question "who talks to whom," accounting for an additional 10 percent of the responses.

Based on personal knowledge of the congregation (resulting from ten years as pulpit minister), I was able to provide information on some of the non-responders. In some cases these members were in family-only networks, composed of parents, children, and in-laws. Others were known to be isolates, and their lack of response may be viewed as a sign of their feelings of non-inclusion.[4]

Identifying the Networks

Using the information provided by members, I was able to construct diagrams which represented the informal communication networks that existed within the Meadowbrook Church of Christ at the time of the survey (see Appendix 5). The resulting network maps showed the identification of twenty-nine different groups. All three types of networks were represented (see above, pp. 32-33).

Twenty-six individuals could be identified as opinion leaders. This determination was based on the criterion that at least five people indicated them as a primary source of information. Isolates were also clearly distinguished as the relationships were charted.[5] Chapter IV, "Results," contains a description of the results of the project.

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[4] Refer to the discussion on the link between inclusion in a group and the prevention of dropping out, above, 44, 46-47.

[5] For a further discussion of the discovery of networks, opinion leaders, isolates, and the practical application of this information, refer to Chapter IV, "Results," and Chapter V, "Conclusions and Implications."

Understanding Congregational Nurture

The second major component of this study is the concept of congregational nurture. In the early stages of the investigation, confusion existed about what ought to be included under this heading. One suggestion emphasized various means of personal devotion and meditation. The idea proved to be inadequate, however. While individual spiritual development is certainly a vital component of faith and maturity, it does not represent the connections that are necessarily a part of congregational life. More is needed than just individual conviction.

A significant component was provided with the realization that Scripture frequently uses the analogy of the human body to help understand the nature of the church. One sign of a healthy body is that it grows and develops through time. From birth until death successful living, both physical and spiritual, is marked by continual growth and development.

The image of church as body carries several corollaries. A most important one for this study is that of mutual interdependence of all the separate parts. The idea of church as "community" follows from this concept. Several writers have noted that Jesus' "new commandment," that we should love one another (Jn. 13:34-35), emphasizes the necessary connections between members in the church.[6]

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[6] For example, Richards and Hoeldtke, 219.

From the study of the church-as-body analogy, the door opened consistently toward the area of "Christian spiritual formation." Both Johnson and Peterson have provided helpful insights and descriptions of what spiritual nurture is, as well as its essential placement in a congregational context. Johnson states the case succinctly: "Spiritual formation simply is not intelligible apart from the communal context and faith tradition in which people are formed."[7] In other words, we cannot talk about spiritual nurture without also addressing congregational life at the same time.

By means of this sequence of discoveries, spiritual nurture became "congregational nurture." The concern for the dynamics of congregational growth led quite naturally to the role of smaller groupings within the congregation as a whole. Such face-to-face relationships are recognized as essential to spiritual vitality on both individual and congregational levels.

The deficiency in this area is that most of the theories of small groups address only those groups which are intentionally formed for a stated purpose. Richards and Hoeldtke have recognized that a certain tension exists between spontaneous, informal associations and "programmed" events.[8] The role of informal communication networks has not been adequately accounted for.

The purpose of this project has been, therefore, to fill the gap. The design has been to study the existence of informal networks within one congregation, with the goal

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[7] Johnson, 19.

[8] Richards and Hoeldtke, 339.

of suggesting applications to the task of congregational nurture. In this way naturally-occurring relationships may become a principal means of accomplishing one of the major tasks of the church.

Testing the Theoretical by Experience

As a part of the evaluation process, interviews were conducted with certain members of the formal leadership of the Meadowbrook church (elders and deacons). One purpose of this activity was to provide continual information to them regarding the nature of the project. Since support for the effort had been strong from the beginning, every effort was made to keep these leaders as close as possible to the dynamics of the study.

A secondary intent was to have these individuals to serve as corroboration of initial impressions based on responses to the questionnaire. Suggested networks were compared with opinions which were derived from observation. The designation of certain individuals as opinion leaders or isolates was checked against the impressions of these formal leaders.

One of the deacons was in charge of the Care Group Program, which was described above (see pp. 14-15). He suggested that he would like to restructure the Care Groups along the lines of informal networks within the church. All of the elders were included in the discussion with the deacon and me.

The request came at an early stage of the research, when fewer than one hundred responses to the questionnaire had been received. When this information was analyzed,

the elements of five strong informal communication networks were discovered. Each of these groups became the core of five new Care Groups. Three other groups were put together from guess-work, using those left over after assigning the first five groups.[9]

Everything Begins with God

To be addressing the place of God at the end of this chapter is surely a case of placing the beginning at the end. Perhaps stated more accurately, the major factor is included at a point of emphatic conclusion. The project was rooted in a biblical conception of the church from the outset. The methods advocated here were viewed as a means to enhance the work of God's people by using resources he has placed among them. As indicated in Chapter II, the entire project assumes the sovereign control of God in the ultimate conduct of the affairs of his church. As Creator, God planned the church before time began. Informal communication networks are merely one tool for improving the spiritual life of the church under his guidance.

As Son of God, Jesus established the church in keeping with the plan of his Father. As Savior of the body, the Christ is its head, and he has never abdicated the role to any person or institution. As the example and definition of growth and maturity for the church, Jesus, as the human/divine revealer of eternity, defines the goal toward which life in the church strives.

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[9] For the results of this experiment, see Chapter IV, "Results."

The project views informal communication networks as one significant avenue through which the sovereign God can work his will in the church. Having studied Scripture, with the purpose of understanding God's intention for spiritual nurture within the life of the church, I am convinced that the Lord intends his church to grow and mature throughout its membership. The application of the study of informal communication networks to congregational nurture brings together secular research with scriptural principles in the study of the dynamics of spiritual growth.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Questionnaire: To Whom Do You Talk?

Congregational response to the request for information on who talks to whom was

difficult to obtain and was collected in stages. The total number of questionnaires

received was 308, which is 77 percent of the adult membership at Meadowbrook.[1]

Information on another 54 members was supplied from my personal acquaintance with

those members. The total number of members included in the survey of informal

communication networks was 366, or 90 percent of the adult membership.

Some members volunteered additional information about their level of

involvement, their history in the congregation, or personal needs. One offered an

explanation of the delay in returning the questionnaire, relating it to a personal "crisis"

which was unknown to most people. Another attached a two-page list of friends and

meaningful relationships within the church.[2]

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[1] Only adult members were included in the investigation of informal
communication networks.

[2] Both responses came after considerable delay, leading to the conclusion that not
all members who delayed their participation were uninvolved in congregational life.

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While isolates tended to be grouped in the category of "non-responders," this was not always the case. A somber quality was associated with a voluntarily-submitted form that said, "None," or "No one," in response to the search for "To whom do you talk?" Four individuals answered in this way, and they handed back their survey sheet almost immediately. Another member, a widow, answered in a way that sounds the alarm for the membership involvement aspects of the application of this research:

> For the most part no one calls and I really don't feel close enough to call on a friendly basis. The only call or visit from any church leader was for money and then it was evident they were afraid since I was single there would be talk . . .

Such an evident "cry for help"[3] demands compassionate intervention from the support structures in the church.

The responses also confirmed the fact that informal communication networks form from a wide variety of contacts among people. Some of the reasons given were geography, long-term association in the church, common ages of children, and shared activities in community, school or work. The overlapping of networks was clear in one response which listed associations by categories: "friends," "prayer group," "kids in common," "Bible study group," "Women's Bible class," and "bridge."

Many positive comments were added as well. Several members expressed appreciation for support during illness or other crises. One said, "It has been encouraging to have so many say they are praying for me during the difficult times." Some were

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[3] The terminology comes from the work of John S. Savage, The Apathetic and Bored Church Member (Pittsford: LEAD Consultants, Inc., 1976). He says (24): "When the adult reaches out for help (gratification) in the church and does not get it, the individual begins to feel the anxiety . . . ."

appreciative of the weekly newsletter mailed from the church office as a source of information and as a reminder of people in need. One member even noted, "Great sermon Sunday morning!"

The information gathered by this means enabled me to identify informal communication networks. In addition, many of the additional comments are potentially useful to ministry leaders and other formal leaders within the church. An informal "barometer" of the things that are important to the members is represented in the remarks on the questionnaires.

NetworkMaps, Opinion Leaders and Isolates

With the data provided by the members of the congregation, I was able to construct network maps representing the existing groups within the Meadowbrook Church of Christ at the time of the survey. Twenty-nine different groups are clearly identified by these maps (Appendix 5). Examples of the major types of networks (wheel, circle, and chain) are to be found among them.

When the questionnaires were processed, we were able to list the names of those who were given at least five times as a consulted source of contact. Twenty-six individuals could be identified as opinion leaders on this basis. These members provide a vital avenue for the formal leadership of the church to give and receive information. Since the opinion leaders already have a place of acceptance among the participants in all forms

of congregational life, knowing who they are can be a great asset to the congregation's leaders.

Three different methods were used in identifying isolates within the membership of the church. Some were revealed by self-designation, and in some ways this was the most dramatic. A powerful impact accompanies the reading of members' self-description as having no friends, no trusted contacts within their chosen fellowship of Christians.

The persistence of this situation speaks of a partial breakdown in an essential function of the church body. Of course, total involvement is an impossible goal, as every organization has its marginal members. Nevertheless, each name represents a lonely spiritual pilgrim. If "Christian community requires `active involvement' with fellow believers,"[4] then each isolate represents a failure of Christian community.

A second criterion for designating a member as an isolate was the failure on his or her part to make any response after repeated opportunities. In some cases these individuals may actually be part of an informal network. The researcher must remember, however, that at least a part of having "isolate" status means "lack of meaningful involvement with others." Declining the invitation to indicate the group with whom one is "involved" is a sign of reluctance to be involved, at the very least.

The third means for identifying isolates was by means of my own acqaintance with members of the congregation after more than ten years of ministry with this church.

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[4] Rubel Shelly and Randall J. Harris, The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the 21st Century Church (West Monroe: Howard Publishing Co., 1992), 96.

Just as I was not surprised by the names on the list of opinion leaders, I also anticipated that many of the isolates would not respond to the request for this information. In any case there is an advantage to having a formalized list, as opposed to merely knowing that a group of marginal, uninvolved members sits in the pews each week.

Organizing Nurture Through Networks

As reported above (pp. 70-71), the Care Group program at the Meadowbrook Church of Christ was reorganized, based on the theory advocated in this project. I have maintained that congregational nurture will be most effective when allowed to follow the lines of informal communication networks. By the time of this writing, those groups have functioned for two years.

Five of the eight Care Groups were organized around specific informal networks that had been identified as existing within the congregation. The composition of the other three groups was based on guess work, although some were "educated guesses." The experiences of the theory-based groups and the arbitrary groups now provide strong corroboration of the value of informal communication networks for spiritual nurture.

The first five groups enjoyed vigorous fellowship and worship together. Their enthusiasm was high while attendance and participation was strong. Two of the groups decided to include their children in their meetings and worship. When a suggestion was made to divide the groups because of their size, it was vigorously rejected. They affirmed

that they could work around space limitations and other challenges presented by their numbers.

In contrast, the other three groups struggled for both leadership and enthusiasm. Attendance was small at each of the groups. Devotionals were frequently poorly organized. Eventually two of the groups combined in order to have the needed resources to carry on the functions of the Care Group program. The third group continues, but it has never achieved a real level of cohesion.

Understanding Nurture, Church and God

Peterson has noted that in America, the land of the free, our religious freedom "has not flowered into maturity in religion."[5] Even in the church, where one would expect to find those who take their life of faith more seriously than the general public, "religion" is often associated with doctrines and activities. Too many members act as if they think "Christian living" is all about worship assemblies and rituals--what happens on Sunday morning.

One specific result of this concentrated study of congregational nurture has been, for me as minister, to acquire a broader sense of what life in the church is intended to be. The spiritual life consists of much more than the study and definition of doctrines of faith. Worship times were never intended to be treated as the major focus of faith.

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[5] Eugene Peterson, Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 36.

Faithful living in the church is about spiritual maturity. It is learning to take the focus off self and learning to love God and neighbor. In this community of faithful people, where the nurturing of each one receives highest priority, we are about transformation. No less than the person of Jesus defines our goal.

The realization that the goal of church activity has often been defined so poorly is at first shocking. At the same time, the confidence that the Lord has not left us without guidance, and that he continues to work in his church provides powerful assurance. One can receive assurance in the fact that in those passages which speak of the Christian's transformation into the image of Christ, the verb is always passive.[6] The end of the story is not yet written, in so far as the individual congregation is concerned.

The challenge remains for each Christian and each church to become part of the nurturing body intended by God when he planned the church. Peterson suggests that this is a hidden message in the open-ended conclusion in the book of Jonah and the gospel of Mark. He says,

> It is the storyteller's art to withhold Jonah's answer so as to provide space for the hearer/reader to provide a personal answer. . . . St. Mark intended gar as his final word. The gar leaves us in mid-stride, off balance. The other foot has to come down someplace. . . . St. Mark's gar is an artful reticence: he holds himself in check so that the reader, the listener, has freedom to "write" a personal conclusion. . . . [A]t the last minute he steps aside and with his gar hands us the pen and says, "Here, you write it, write a resurrection conclusion with your life."[7]

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[6] Rom. 8:29; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; see also other metaphors of growth, Eph. 2:19-22; 2 Tim. 1:9; etc., in which the action happens to the Christian.

[7] Under the Unpredictable Plant, 194, 196.

The congregation and its leaders should find great encouragement from the realization that the future is open. Every minister and Christian should be strengthened when we realize that we are still writing the story as we strive toward spiritual maturity. The task of congregational nurture is never finished until time itself ends. The conviction that God is still sovereign means that God himself and the Lord Jesus Christ will insure a successful end to the story. As Christians, we are privileged to be active participants on the winning side.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Meadowbrook Church of Christ

The Meadowbrook Church of Christ has a solid past and a future filled with exciting potential. With a history of change and innovation, the experience of the congregation has prepared them to meet the unknown future with a flexible response which is appropriate to the needs of the culture. Their commitment to God's will as expressed in Scripture, as well as their place in the Restoration Movement, suggests the guiding principles which will outline the church's decisions for years to come.

The leadership is already sensitive to congregational leadership issues. They recognize the need to make every effort to include the members, many of whom are professionals and leaders in the community, in the communication links within the church. Quarterly "congregational communication" meetings provide one means of making current information available to the church.

Their efforts to allow the deacons to function independently, according to their assigned area of ministry, is one of the ways these elders have demonstrated their focus on spiritual matters. They resist allowing parking lots, needed repairs, or requests for new

equipment to find a place on the agenda for elders' meetings. Members are consistently referred to ministry leaders for matters of programming and equipment. The elders have moved to limit their control of power in the church by their initiation of a five-year rotation of service. They are committed to leading by example and service, rather than by authoritarian rule. Such an approach seems ideally suited to the makeup of the membership of Meadowbrook.

The ministry team continues to provide both freshness and stability in congregational life. My pulpit ministry has now extended beyond twelve years. While tenure alone may have a limited significance, Schaller is emphatic about connecting long-term service and numerical growth:

> . . . it is rare to find a large church that has had significant numerical growth, and sustained that growth, without the benefit of a long-term pastorate. The large church usually will benefit from the leadership of a long-term pastor who is an aggressive proponent of church growth.[1]

The youth ministry continues to be guided by a full-time Youth Minister and a deacon. With emphasis on both senior- and junior-high programs, opportunities abound for membership involvement. In addition, a half-time director of children's education continues to work to provide excitement for children prior to entering the "youth program."

One of the elders has recently been engaged as a half-time Involvement Minister. The initial purpose was to provide someone who could concentrate on activating marginal members by involving them in various programs of the church's ministries. This design is

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[1] Schaller, Growing Plans, 116.

being served in significant ways as more members receive personal attention from the congregational leadership.

An additional benefit has been that a new and effective avenue of communication between the church office staff and the elders has been opened. One of the elders has become a part-time staff member. Wearing his elder's "hat," this individual spends enough time in the daily concerns of the staff to be able to bridge the gap between the two. Since he is trusted as a peer by the other elders, his recommendations often carry more weight than a request from the regular staff.

The church has an excellent public image in the community. They are perceived as the church that is committed to "making a difference in Jackson." A recent seminar on current topics of human need (cancer, grief, family issues, medical ethics) has been well-attended by members of the community. Meadowbrook is capitalizing on its physical location and its geographically scattered membership in order to serve as a cosmopolitan church.

The leadership of the church has been aware of the need to address the issues of congregational nurture for some time. Specifically, they have been concerned about being able to involve isolates in the life of the congregation in meaningful ways. Their positive response to the information provided by this study is in part due to this pre-existing sensitivity to the issues raised in the project.

<u>Informal Communication Networks</u>

By virtue of ordinary, casual contact among its constituents, every human association produces informal groupings. These "networks" become an important means by which information and attitudes are diffused within the formal organization. Since they are emergent, as opposed to formal, in nature, informal networks possess certain unique qualities. The characteristics of informal communication networks make them an effective means of encouraging a sense of belonging among the individuals who participate.

In its physical, human aspect, the church is an association of people. The recognition of the specific dynamics of informal communication networks has significant implications for the spiritual life of a church. Understanding how they function will enable the leadership of the congregation to employ them in effective ways in order to strengthen a sense of community among the members.

Identifying Opinion Leaders and Isolates

Network maps will enhance the identification of opinion leaders in the congregation. By including these individuals in the flow of information, formal leaders can increase their effectiveness in disseminating news and events within the whole congregation. In this way, one of the main challenges encountered by the elders at the Meadowbrook church--how to achieve congregational communications effectively--can be addressed.

Another significant group that can be identified immediately from the use of network maps is the isolates within the membership of the church. These individuals have no significant relationships with members or leaders. When asked the question, "To whom do you talk?" many of these members often make no response at all. When they do, their resonse of "no one" carries a forceful impact for anyone who is sensitive to the needs of community within the church.

The importance of this observation was revealed in an interview with one of Meadowbrook's current elders. His own experience in church life has included times when he felt disconnected from both meaningful relationships and the flow of information concerning what was happening. The resulting feelings of discontent and isolation made him struggle spiritually. In response he formulated his first rule of life: "If you are not happy in your church life, you're not happy."

The isolation of church members represents a direct contradiction of the image of the church as a body, a family, and a community of believers. As such they are prime candidates for dropping out of church life altogether. By this means they become casualties in the spiritual warfare which should be of ultimate concern for the church. Isolates represent a significant part of the problem of the church's "back door."

Closing the Back Door

By means of network maps, the isolates can be identified by name. While placing these names on a list may not be significant in itself, such a list helps to create a reality to

their existence. The problem can be identified objectively in order to be addressed more effectively.

An effective involvement ministry could use this list in several ways. These members could be asked about their experience, interests, and talents. Their names could be referred to ministry leaders who might include them in one of the programs of the church. In this way they would become a part of a group with the potential of developing that missing sense of belonging.

If such a program were done effectively, a church could rescue many members who are "on the fringes" of involvement before they become dropouts. A lackluster spiritual existence could be awakened to the thrill of grace. Another witness to the gospel of Christ might thus be added to the forces already at work.

Congregational Nurture

As demonstrated in the experience of the Meadowbrook Church of Christ, informal communication networks are also an effective means for organizing groups for purposes of congregational nurture. In the reorganization of their Care Group program, five groups were formed by following network maps. Members of three other groups were assigned randomly. While the five were successful from the beginning, the three random groups have struggled, with two of them combining due to lack of participation.

The suggestion of this project is that the unique dynamics provided by informal communication networks are ideally suited to the church's need for an effective means of congregational nurture. Informal associations occur naturally, according to channels of

contact that offer least resistance among members. Communication is, therefore, more likely to be genuine and more likely to deal with issues beneath the usual, surface-only greetings exchanged in public gatherings.

Such an environment is more conducive to developing spiritual life than one which relies on formal associations within the church. Assuming that congregational leadership recognizes spiritual nurture as a primary task of every church, the potential role of informal groups is highly significant in the planning of church life. The possible results from pursuing congregational nurture through informal communication networks are limited only by the vision of leadership.

The Sovereignty of God

The church's task is not defined by the church itself. A congregation is not "successful" because its doors remain open and not necessarily because its membership grows. A church is successful only when it accomplishes the task given by its planner and creator. In every case, the recognition of its task points the church back to God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

God the Father planned the church before time began and brought it into existence at precisely the moment he had chosen. By means of the Son's sacrificial death and powerful resurrection, Satan's ultimate power was destroyed. The church exists by the sovereign power and grace of God without human contribution.

As the "people of God," the church represents an outpost of heaven in the territory claimed by the Evil One. Jesus recognized him as "the prince of this world,"[2] and the church defies his control. Only the power of God's Spirit in the church is equal to the danger posed by the ancient dragon. Only the revelation of his will for us, the Scriptures of both Old Testament and New, are sufficient to guide us.

The reality of this spiritual warfare defines the ultimate purpose for the church. The prize for which the war is being contested is human souls. The church is called to be faithful to the sovereign God, through faith in the Son, by means of the Spirit. Our purpose is not confined to this world, to what can be seen. In the final analysis our purpose in the church merges with God's purpose in the world. Ecclesiology is bound to eschatology, as the authors of The Second Incarnation have noted:

> . . . God's purpose is being worked out in the arena of our tumult. He is bringing sons and daughters to glory. He is acting to unite our fragmented world in the Son. He desires our salvation and waits to give us a "rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:11).[3]

When the church recognizes the reality of this great purpose, we have a powerful motivation for actively engaging in our task. Questions of purpose are being asked more urgently as the new century comes nearer:

> . . . Our task while waiting is . . . to be a responsible and healthy body to our head. . . . Our expectation of sharing Christ's glory is at the heart of our faith. . . . For the church cannot be faithful as a second incarnation without the boldness that comes of certainty in the very great and precious promises made to it by Christ. . . .

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[2] John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11.

[3] Shelly and Harris, 228.

With its future assured, it can find the motivation to face its current challenges with boldness.[4]

As the century ends, no one can question that the human search for a spiritual dimension to life has intensified. For some this quest will mean nothing more than an economic opportunity, as in the case of Deja Vu Tours. The Berkeley, California, company specializes in "spiritual adventure" tours, from Stonehenge to the Jordan River.[5]

For others the goal will never be adequately defined or understood. Many will not consider the Bible's description of the spiritual struggle as being worthy of exclusive consideration, as if a definite conclusion were the goal. As Kenneth L. Woodward has recently written, "Americans love the search so much that the idea of a destination is lost."[6]

For the church that is seized by the vision of God's intention for his people, however, a more exciting possibility exists. The modern thirst for the spiritual can mean an opportunity that is equal with that of the first century when Christians were defined by their love for God and one another. The church is the body in which God has placed his power for redeeming lives and filling them with meaning through faith in his Son.

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[4] Ibid., 234-235.

[5] Kantrowitz, et al, 54.

[6] Kenneth L. Woodward, "On the Road Again," Newsweek, November 28, 1994, 61.

APPENDIX 1

THE MEADOWBROOK LOGO
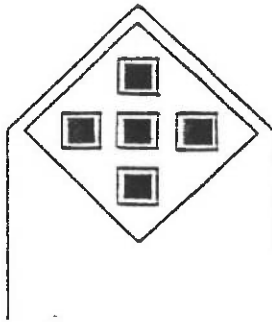
Meadowbrook Church of Christ

Making a difference in Jackson

The Church Stationery Logo
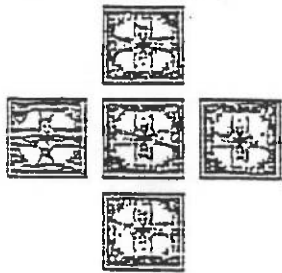
Windows

a look inside the Meadowbrook Church of Christ

The Current Church Bulletin Logo

APPENDIX 2

MEADOWBROOK'S MISSION/ROLE STATEMENT

Our mission is to glorify God by reflecting the character and ministry of Jesus in the present world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Who We Are

1. We are a people of God, called together by our acceptance of the good news that through faith in Jesus we are forgiven. As God's people we honor his word above all else, and we are committed to submit ourselves to whatever we learn of his will. Our practice of faith and our terms of fellowship are set within the boundaries of the proper study of the Bible as God's very words.

2. We are a spiritual family, called by God to serve in partnership with him. As a family we are committed to serving one another, caring for one another, and sharing with each other both our joys and sorrows. We accept a mutual responsibility for each other before God to encourage maturity in faith, unity, discovery and use of our gifts, and to reach out to seekers who do not belong to the family of God.

3. We are a healing community, rather than a fellowship of those who are already whole. As we seek and administer healing, we offer acceptance and healing to others in

the name of Jesus, the Great Physician. With his healing touch as our example, we seek those who are sick and hurting.

4. We are a place of teaching, providing our members and believers in the whole region with learning opportunities for maturity and greater service in the kingdom. Resource speakers are selected with such a goal in view. Courses of training that are staffed locally are frequently chosen with the broader audience in mind.

5. Led by the Spirit, and by conscientiously relying on the Word, we are seekers after God's truth, following where he may lead. Without any desire to bring controversy or unnecessary conflict with other churches, we are, nevertheless, willing to make some difficult choices in order to be faithful to his call. Each decision is charted with careful attention to study and prayer.

6. We are followers, first of God through Christ, and second of shepherds who lead by teaching, example, prayer, and encouragement. Their authority is neither arbitrary nor high-handed, but rather grows from their own spiritual example within the congregation. They willingly resubmit themselves to the members for reaffirmation.

What We Are

1. We are a worshipping fellowship, recognizing that our worship is a response to the sovereign grace of the Lord. We praise him and the Son in the singing of hymns. In prayer we acknowledge his reign, as well as our unworthiness, and beseech his help with our daily life. We honor the reading of Scripture as the hearing of his voice and his will

for us. As that word is proclaimed and interpreted, we add to our knowledge and spiritual development. We commune together and with our Lord in the Supper of Remembrance. By his grace we join in the giving of our resources in a spirit of thanksgiving.

2. We are a proclaiming community, presenting the truth about God and the gospel to those who have not claimed their hope in Christ. By means of our compassion in times of crisis, toward those inside and outside our fellowship, we tell of a compassionate Savior. When we serve on behalf of others, giving unselfishly of ourselves and resources, we announce the Lord who is servant of all. As we live out our values which have been built on the life of Jesus, we model the life-changing quality of godly living. On those occasions when we are asked about our faith, we answer with the reasons for the hope that we have in Christ. Our commitment extends to other cultures and countries, including both domestic and foreign missions.

3. We are a community of exhortation, intentional in working toward the spiritual strengthening of those inside the family of faith, as well as showing concern for those who remain on the outside. Classes and study groups are designed to assist members in growing into the image of Christ as they participate regularly in corporate and individual study and meditation. Children receive special attention in both classes and Children's Church. Worship is designed to lift up the presence of God and to offer healing to each sufferer, whether seeker or member.

4. We are a trusting fellowship, recognizing that whatever is accomplished is only possible because of him who lives in us. If any effort achieves success, it is because of his

blessing. In any case that we overcome defeat, it is due to his intervention. Even if we are denied some goal, if his answer is "No," in Christ, his answer is "Yes."
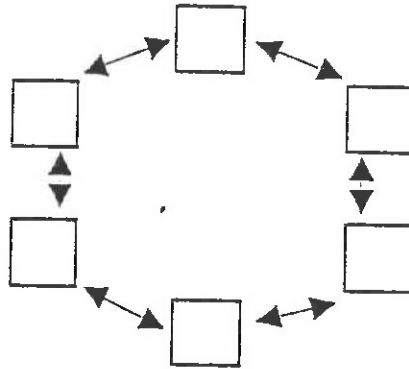
APPENDIX 3

TYPICAL NETWORK MAPS

A "Wheel"
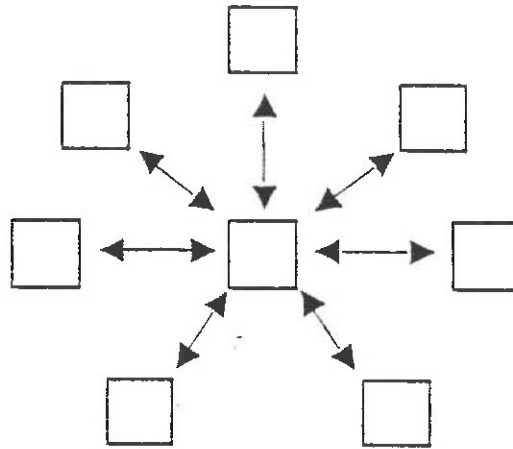
A "Circle"

A "Chain"

APPENDIX 4

SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

<u>An Appeal to All Meadowbrook Members</u>

Many of you are aware that I am working toward a Doctor of Ministry degree (D. Min.) at Abilene Christian University (they refer to us as "deemins"). My research project will include charting the informal "networks" among the members in this congregation. The higher the number of participants, the more effective the results will be. If you are willing to help, please provide me with the information requested below. (Please participate as individuals, rather than as couples or families.)

NAME _____

Think of your communications with people at church during the last twelve months (include notes, face-to-face contacts, or telephone conversations). To whom have you most frequently gone for advice and counsel? for news about church events or decisions? for friendly contact or social activities? (You need not choose a different person for each situation, but you may do so.)

List their names: _____

If more than one, who was the most frequently contacted

by you? _____

If there is a common element that brings (brought) you together (geography, age of children, etc.), please describe it:

How long have you been a member at Meadowbrook?

APPENDIX 5

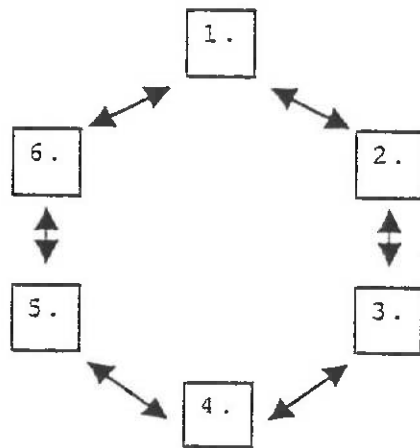## REPRESENTATIVE NETWORK MAPS
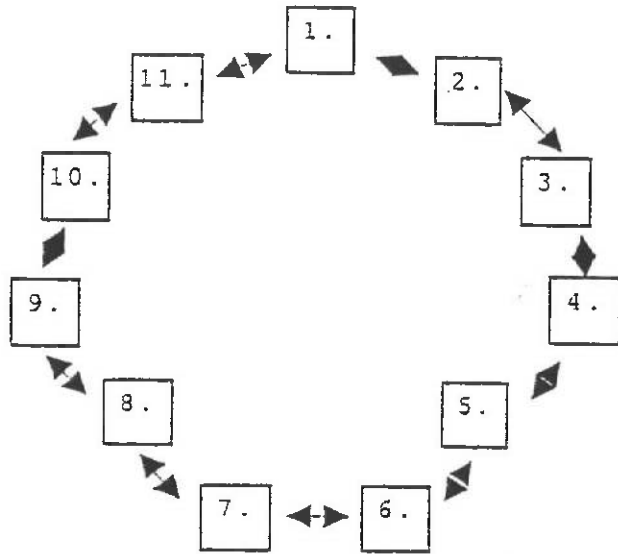
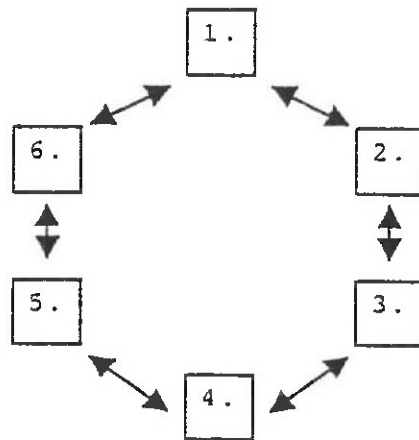A "Young Marrieds" Network

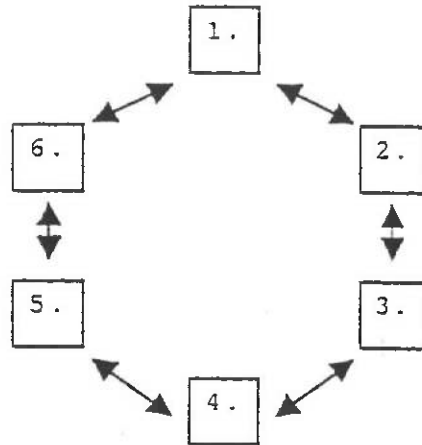A "Friendship" Network
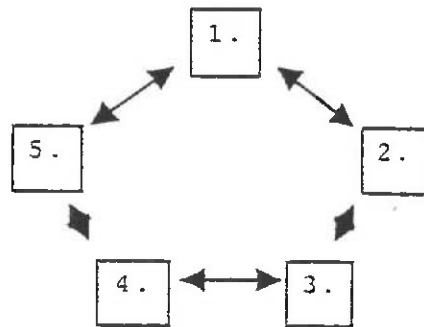
A "Singles" Network
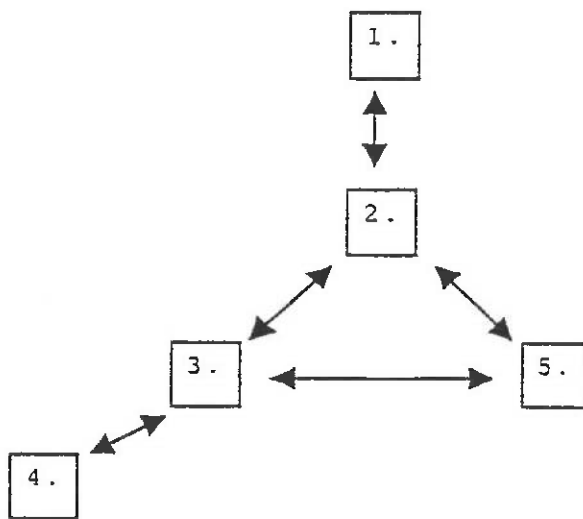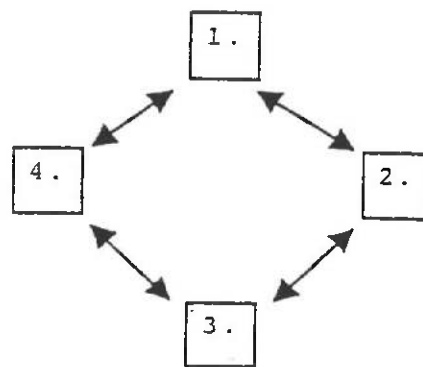

A "Friends" Network
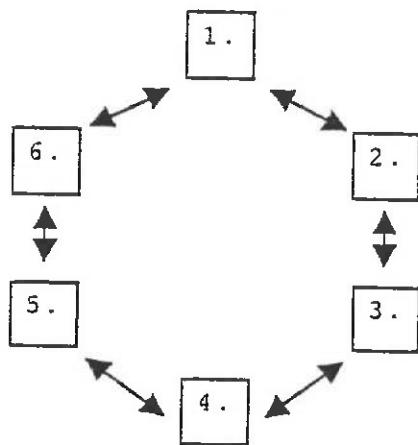
An "Elders" Network
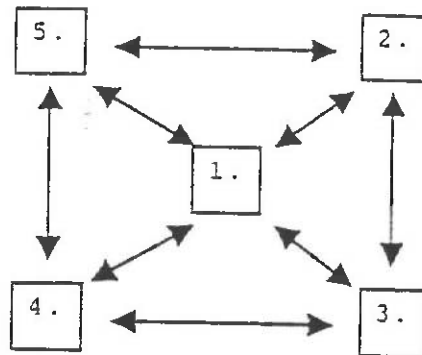

A "Young Couples" Network

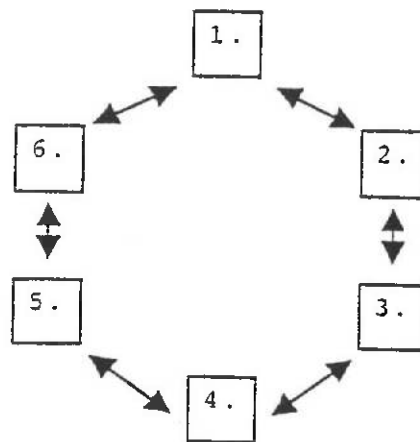An "Old Friends" Network

An "Old Timers" Network
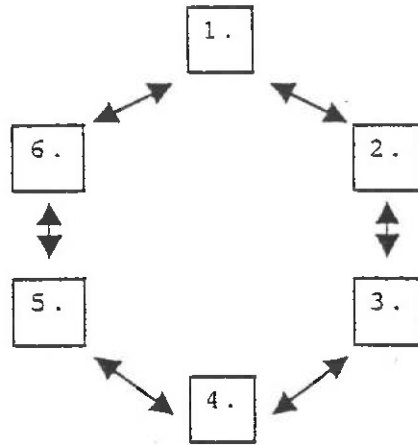
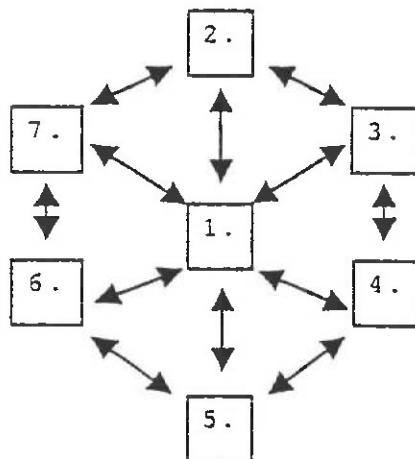"Friends and Co-Workers"

A "Geographical" Network

A "Bible Study" Network

A "Tennis Team" Network

A "Widows" Network

A "Friends and Family" Network

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