

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

THE CONNECTION OF THE PULPIT AND CHURCH GROWTH
WITHIN CHURCHES OF CHRIST
IN TEXAS

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
By
Jacob Daniel Hawk

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
2023

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ABSTRACT

The numerical decline of church attendance in America has been a grave concern for decades, but it was only enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Churches of Christ (COC), a nondenominational religious group born from the Restoration Movement, are not immune to this crisis, having experienced substantial decay within their own fellowship. However, a specific question has not been considered critically. Do COC grow numerically based on the preaching and pastoring of the lead minister? Can dynamic preaching and passionate pastoring repeal the trend of numerical decline? The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. To explore the potential connection, phenomenological interviews were conducted in five COC in Texas with a research population of four to six families composed of “devoted” members (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” members (placing membership within the last year) at each COC in the study. The research setting was COC in Texas with at least 250 people in weekly attendance who have been in existence for at least twenty years. Research interviews were conducted through Zoom, transcribed through Fathom software, to define common themes and evaluate the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers in COC in Texas.

Keywords: Church attendance, minister, pastor, preaching, morale, connection

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the author's beautiful wife, Emmalee Suzanne Hawk. Thank you for never allowing this author to give up on his dreams and for your unending love. I cherish you and serving the Kingdom together. Thank you for always telling me, "Keep Preaching!"

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List of Abbreviations

Liberty University (LU)

Churches of Christ (COC)

Disciples of Christ (DOC)

Independent Christian Church (ICC)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Declining church attendance in America is common vernacular among religious groups and disheartened clergy (Barna, 2016). Regression is not confined to urban or rural domains, but it has plagued the gamut of American civilization (Francis, et, al. 2021). Consequently, the discouraging trend has caused many religious professionals to exit the ministry, desperately seeking secular careers (Joynt, 2018). Furthermore, those who hoped to remain employed by local churches have been forced to make unexpected and disillusioned life changes as stressed and exhausted church budgets resulted in furloughs and layoffs of devoted church staff (Miner, et, al, 2018). These situations produce ominous clouds and unfavorable odds in the hearts and minds of church leaders around the world (Francis, 2021).

A plethora of factors could boast responsibility. One could debate if the biggest culprits stem from external forces in society or internal problems in the church (Burns, et. al, 2019). Nevertheless, trajectories must be reversed, and religious Christian groups, specifically Churches of Christ (COC), a nondenominational religious group born from the Restoration Movement, must regain footing and reestablish momentum (Yeakley, 2008).

It has always been Jesus's desire for his kingdom to grow and expand (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 1:8). The Messiah's aspiration has not changed and should be passionately furthered today. Due to COVID-19, churches have faced insurmountable challenges (Harlaonou, 2020), but a physical virus cannot produce spiritual failure. COC must confidently march forward and strategically navigate the challenging and often deceptive minefield of post-pandemic spiritual fervor (O'Loughlin, 2021).

Background to the Problem

American churches of all denominations and religious traditions are struggling to retain members and attract community guests (Barna, 2016). Organized religion has absorbed a massive blow, developing a less than desirable reputation, especially among Millennials and Generation Z (2016). Specifically, for COC, this is not an inaugural battle, but an unfortunate symptom that has plagued the religious group for decades (Yeakley, 2008).

Statisticians and church growth consultants, such as George Barna and Thom Rainer, have devoted much of their careers and expertise to analyzing and processing statistical data, frantically attempting to systematically establish dominant reasons for spiritual calamity (Rainer & Geiger, 2011). The decline in religious interest, however, may not solely be due to a post-Christian society. As a fallible institution, the church could be responsible (Bruggeman, et. al, 1997), and the lead minister could be as challenging of a hurdle to overcome as the concept of organized religion. (Styles, 2019). In many ways, the “who” is more important than the “what.”

Jesus Christ promised that he would so strongly build his church that not even the gates of hades would overcome its influence or existence (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 16:18). Nevertheless, a large gap exists between the extinction of the church and the distinction of the church. The aim should be success, not simply survival. Some churches experience success while others barely scrape by (Barna, 2016), providing a noticeable difference that must be considered. Abysmal performance can, and should, be placed on the lead minister’s shoulders (Woolever & Bruce, 2012).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. For a theoretical

foundation, this study was informed by the Contingency Leadership Theory of Fred E. Fiedler (Northouse, 2019), specifically in a leaders' adoption of, rather than adaptation to, church growth. To strengthen the probability of experiencing a present reality of Jesus's promise for an unshakable kingdom (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Hebrews 12:28), it is imperative to understand the dynamics and rhythms of church attrition. COC have faced monumental challenges of declining memberships (Yeakley, 2008). It is the purpose for this project and the ambition of this author to better understand if lead ministers in COC can skillfully reverse the numerical decline.

Theological Context

Preaching the gospel, at its core, is a divine anointing (Lee, 2009) - a spiritual calling of eternal significance. Skills must be strengthened, and abilities must be deepened for the glory of God (Alcántara, 2019). God can use anyone, yet he wants the product delivered to be the very best possible (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 3: 23-24). When excellence is not pursued, average results lackadaisically surface (Merida, 2009).

Any man afforded the opportunity to preach on God's behalf must consider the mission and the moment sacred. When Paul was writing to the young preacher Timothy concerning his ministry and calling in Ephesus, Paul outlined several important tasks for Timothy to conquer. Centralized to Timothy's enterprise were effective study and passionate preaching of the word. Paul exhorted this young spokesman with the following words: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2:15). In his previous letter to Timothy, Paul provided these specific recommendations:

Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4:13-16).

Through the pastoral epistles of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus, the student of Scripture develops a firm realization that serving as a minister and herald of the gospel is not a profession measured by worldly expectations or benchmarks for success. It is a spiritual privilege and holy task that must be approached with utmost reverence, passion, and humility (Craddock, 2011).

Historical Context

The decline of COC is not a new trend (Yeakley, 1995). For many years, COC, like other religious groups, have unfortunately beheld smaller church memberships, and in turn, shrinking charitable giving and budgets (O’Loughlin, 2021). For this study, “church membership” is defined as baptized believers who attend worship services at least once a month, as well as those actively engaged in ministries and service opportunities (Bible classes, outreach programs, benevolent efforts, counseling centers, etc.) of the local church body. Additionally, “charitable giving” is defined by monies collected by the local church through free-will giving of tithes, offerings, and donations.

Even though church attendance has been in a steady decline for decades, COVID-19 has significantly accelerated the demise of churches around the world (Francis, 2021). Many churches have reported losing close to one-third of their membership (Harlaoanu, 2020), as infrequent church attendees before the pandemic never returned. This does not equate to the

automatic degeneration of the spiritual maturity of churches, as addition can be witnessed through subtraction (Doyle, 2003), but from a numerical and monetary perspective, churches are less robust after COVID-19 than they were before (O' Loughlin, 2021).

The last few years have been unprecedented, but COC and lead ministers must implement strategic steps to ensure a better future. Lingering effects from COVID-19 cannot be stopped, but declining trends can be reversed. Strong, dynamic, and visionary leaders must be trained, developed, and rise to the occasion (Newton, 2020). The church cannot walk away from the challenge because of hard seasons (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 4:2).

Sociological Context

This study is advantageous to COC and all Christian denominations and religious groups. The COC has not monopolized effective leadership of lead ministers and powerful preaching, as many churches throughout the world have benefited from spiritual, talented, and passionate proclaimers of God's word and pastoral leadership (Piper, 2018). What can be learned from one should be observed by many. Churches should not draw lines where Jesus intended bridges.

Church dynamics possess common themes traced across denominational lines. Though unique, valuable insights from rural settings can still be implemented in urban environments (Francis, et. al, 2021). Declining church attendance is not a sickness infecting only one religious tradition or denomination, but a spiritual endemic experienced everywhere (Haskell, et. al, 2016). If COC can learn valuable lessons and gain insightful feedback, other religious groups will glean beneficial tutelage.

This also resonates with how church members perceive their pastors and spiritual leaders. Church members seek common personas and helpful qualities in their lead minister (Root, 2013). This truth does not change by decade or region. Spiritual sheep long to connect with their

shepherds, and this was Jesus' longing as well (Schaller, 1986). When Jesus shared one of his final conversations with Peter, Jesus commanded him twice, "Take care of my sheep" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 21:16) and "Feed my sheep" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 21:17). Healthy ministry and harmonious leadership were important to the heart of Jesus, and it is just as critically important to the heart of Jesus today (Ghorpade, et. al, 2012).

Theoretical Context

From the fruit of this study, this author hopes to better understand the lived experiences and perceptions of church members concerning their lead minister and to provide tangible recommendations and steps of improvement for the lead minister in becoming more effective in his God-ordained task. Spiritual stagnation is not a spiritual state endorsed by God, but a dangerous, undesirable territory (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 9:24). A messenger of God should strive for excellence in all things (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 3: 23-24). Deepening of skills should hold prominent importance (Proctor, 1992).

The perceptions of those on the pew cannot be overemphasized (Neff, 2006). A lead minister will become a better teacher when he becomes a better listener. James, the half-brother of Jesus penned, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 1: 19-20). Valuing the insights of others produces remarkable blessings and spiritual growth for all churches (Neff, 2006), but especially for COC and the lead minister serving them.

Researcher's Relationship to the Problem

This author has been blessed to serve as a lead minister within COC for over a decade. By God's grace, he has been privileged to serve growing churches. He was also reared within the fellowship.

His friends and colleagues, however, have not been as fortunate. Even though they are talented lead ministers, something is missing. The goal for this researcher was to discover not only "what", but "why". With this author's extensive background within COC, possible bias could exist within research findings. This author, however, has yearned to remain emotionally neutral to discoveries, realizing that conclusions found from researching the targeted COC within this study can benefit all Christian religious groups.

This author is discouraged by the large numbers of clergy and religious professionals exiting the field (Joynt, 2018). COC is not immune to the problem (Yeakley, 1995). Many of this author's colleagues have sought other careers before and after COVID-19. A lack of numerical growth and steady decline in American churches has fueled the problem (Miner, et. al, 2010). This author longs to see COC regain vision and begin growing again, not only spiritually, but numerically. Losing devoted, naturally gifted lead ministers is a tragedy that must be stopped, or at the very least, decreased. By meditating on the theological importance of preaching, historical trends of COC, and beneficial virtues of lead ministers across all Christian traditions and denominations, helpful conclusions should propel COC and lead ministers in the right direction.

Statement of the Problem

Church attendance has not seen substantial growth in America for decades (Barna, 2016), but the disheartening trend of church decline has only been accelerated by COVID-19 (Pluss, 2020). COC, a nondenominational religious group born from the Restoration Movement, is not immune to this national, spiritual crisis, having experienced substantial decay within their

fellowship for decades (Yeakley, 1995). A specific concern has not been historically considered, producing a momentous gap. How much can, or should, the downward style of COC be attributed to the weekly voice in the pulpit? To what degree do COC numerically grow based on the lead minister teaching them?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas.

Research Questions

RQ 1: In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the preaching of the lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

RQ 2: In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the pastoring of the lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

RQ 3: In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the preaching of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

RQ 4: In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the pastoring of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

RQ 5: When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s preaching, versus other factors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

RQ 6: When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s pastoring, versus other factors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

Assumptions and Delimitations

The following assumptions and delimitations guided this study and this researcher’s project. Assumptions and delimitations were observed and kept in full view as conversations were administered and as data was processed. Otherwise, findings would have been noticeably skewed and misrepresented.

Research Assumptions

Churches within Texas would provide substantial feedback through church attendance records and lived experiences of members needed to produce tangible conclusions. Devoted members would be willing to provide reasonable feedback concerning their perception of the lead minister's influence. New members would be willing to provide reasonable feedback concerning their perception of the lead minister's influence.

Furthermore, Churches within Texas with at least 250 people in weekly attendance with a minimum of twenty-year histories could locate church records of appropriate proportion to provide feedback for the parameters of this study. Video conferencing software, transcribing, and transcription would be completed without technological challenge or hindrance.

Delimitations of Research Design

COC, though non-denominational in structure and doctrine, provided feedback specific to experiences and factors within their own fellowship. This feedback might be different from feedback received from other denominations. This study was limited to established COC with a minimum history of twenty years. This distinction provides proper time to analyze trends of numerical growth (or decline) in church attendance. Churches often "boom" in infancy and "plateau" within their first few years (Barna, 2016). Observing at least two decades of church records, and hearing at least twenty years of member experiences, provided a foundational picture of the church's progression or degression.

This study was limited to midsized COC with at least 250 people in attendance, a numerical threshold and common benchmark of COC (Yeakley, 2008), as COC are often categorized by the following sizes: 100 or more, 250 or more, 500 or more, 750 or more, 1000 or

more, 2,000 or more (Yeakley, 2008). Very few COC reported weekly attendance that exceeds 2,000. Churches with 250 or more in attendance represent a large gamut within COC.

This study was limited to COC in Texas. Often known as the “Bible Belt,” some of the largest and longest tenured COC reside in Texas (Yeakley, 2008), offering many potential churches to research for the parameters of this study.

This study was limited to “devoted” members (attending worship services at least twice a month”) and to “new” members (placing membership within the last year) of COC. The explanations of “devoted” members for remaining in their COC revealed the greatest strengths of the COC being studied. The perceptions and explanations of “new” members for selecting a new COC were also significant to this study.

This study was limited to the lived experiences and perceptions of “devoted” members and “new” members selected by the lead minister in each COC. Due to privacy concerns, COC do not release membership records to nonmembers. Therefore, the lead minister selected individuals to be interviewed who met the criteria of “devoted” and “new” members.

Definitions of Terms

1. *Churches of Christ*: COC are a nondenominational religious group born from the Restoration Movement, first publicly acknowledged by the United States Census of 1906. At the core of their doctrinal beliefs are strict adherence to New Testament Christianity which includes, but is not limited to, autonomous church government, male spiritual leadership, baptism for the forgiveness of sins, weekly observance of the Lord’s Supper, acapella singing, and the service and giftedness of all believers.

2. *Restoration Movement*: A strong push among religious groups, Christian denominations, and pioneer preachers of the nineteenth century (the 1800s) to abolish man-made

creeds and traditional dogmas. It was a plea for the unity of all believers, driven by the ideals of being known as Christians only but not the only Christians. At the center of the Restoration Movement were Disciples of Christ (DOC), the Independent Christian Church (ICC), and Churches of Christ (COC).

3. *Lead Minister*: A lead minister is a paid church staff member whose primary duties are to be the central teacher and spokesman for the church, as well as to serve the greater church in pastoral duties and administration.

4. *Elders*: The governing body of leaders for each autonomous congregation in COC. The elders also serve as the employer(s) of the lead minister.

5. *New Members*: Members who have placed membership at a COC in the last year.

6. *Devoted Members*: Members of COC who attend services at least twice a month.

7. *Pastoring*: The lead minister's service to the church would include, but not be limited to, hospital visitation, home Bible studies, counseling, performing marriage ceremonies, and conducting funerals and memorial services.

8. *Preaching*: The public proclamation of God's word to a physical or virtual gathered audience.

9. *Church Growth*: A numerical increase in membership and weekly attendance.

10. *Charitable Giving*: The amount of money collected by church members from tithes and offerings.

11. *Church Members*: Baptized believers by immersion for the forgiveness of sins.

12. *Church Morale*: The overall attitude(s) of church members—positive, negative, apathetic, etc.

13. *Millennials*: Individuals born between 1981-1996.

14. *Generation Z*: Individuals born between 1997-2012.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the popular discipline of church growth. Through researching a targeted scope of COC, findings can guide this nondenominational religious group to discover where, when, how, and why they can improve from past decades of decline. (Yeakely, 2008). From a pragmatic perspective, it helps elderships establish strategic processes and procedures for hiring and retaining lead ministers (Chait & Stross, 2021). These administrative disciplines greatly impact the future of respective congregations. From an ecumenical view, all churches should theoretically benefit from the findings targeted to the COC (Pluss, 2020). Every church needs strong leaders (McClelland & Burnham, 2008).

In a post-Christian society, developing and growing a church numerically and spiritually is not a simple task. Church leaders must understand the times and act accordingly (O'Loughlin, 2021). Lord willing, this study will open eyes to the challenges at hand and magnify the importance of service and giftedness for Kingdom growth (McGuiggan, 1996).

Jesus wanted his greatest leaders to pick up the towel, get their hands and feet dirty, and serve (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 13: 1-17). On one occasion, Jesus powerfully voiced to a large, combined crowd of Jesus' supporters and opponents,

When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, "It's going to rain," and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, "It's going to be hot," and it is.

Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Luke 12:54-56)?

Today's religious and church leaders cannot be guilty of the same hypocrisy. They must see the challenges before them, and through humble hearts, devoted prayer, and passionate spirits, seize the day. The Kingdom of God is too precious for anything less.

Studies have been conducted and books have been written to analyze trends of numerical church growth (Burns, et. al, 2019). Expert statisticians have traced numerical themes and outcomes (Rainer & Geiger, 2011), and the fruit of these efforts are advantageous to any who will seriously consider the discoveries. However, there has not been much offered with the narrowed focus of this study, connecting church growth with the persona and personality of the lead minister filling the pulpit every week. There is also a noticeable void of member perceptions and lived experiences for how they perceive the influence of the lead minister in teaching and pastoral ministry, and how it affects the member commitment to the local church. This researcher hoped to validate conclusions and fill this gap. Consequently, findings provide helpful information for connecting the pulpit and church growth, future consideration for the hiring of lead minister, and retaining them for future employment and ministry. Connecting the right minister with the right church is highly important and cannot be handled lazily or irresponsibly (Woolever & Bruce, 2012).

Summary of the Design

This project employed a qualitative phenomenological study, coupled with semi structured interviews of participants. The lived experiences of "devoted" and "new" church members were carefully evaluated to legitimize the integrity of the research. A phenomenological study was suitable to accomplish this purpose.

This researcher interviewed "devoted" members of each of the COC targeted in this study. These members provided feedback concerning their perceptions of both the

communication and pastoral nature of lead ministers. As those who have witnessed years of circumstances, they offered unique observations from their reservoir of experiences.

This researcher also interviewed “new” church members who recently selected a new COC as their church home. Why was this selection made? Additionally, why did they exit their previous church setting, and how much influence did the lead minister(s) play in both decisions?

Purposive sampling, better understood as, “choosing participants for a particular *purpose*” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 178), was used to identify churches that met specific criteria. With too large of a population base, results are difficult to analyze and interpret. The criteria for selection included: (a) Established COC with a minimum history of at least twenty years, (b) COC with at least 250 people in weekly attendance, and (c) COC in Texas.

The researcher strategically chose the following COC in Texas to participate in the study:

Brown Street COC; Waxahachie, Texas

Lewisville COC; Lewisville, Texas

McDermott Road COC; Plano, Texas

Memorial COC; Houston, Texas

Shawnee Trail COC; Frisco, Texas

Additionally, of significant importance, the lead ministers in these COC preach a minimum of forty-eight of the fifty-two Sundays of the year, roughly 92% of the calendar year. Therefore, respondents’ feedback of the lead minister’s influence in a COC is based on hearing the same man’s voice and watching the same man’s interaction in the COC. There are not numerous staff to evaluate.

Despite declining church attendance across America (Barna, 2016), these five COC have witnessed numerical growth in membership and attendance for the last several years,

substantiated by church attendance records. This researcher rejoiced in the numerical growth of these COC, but also yearned to explore why these COC were blessed by numerical growth when other COC of similar sizes and histories declined or struggled to maintain their current size.

Except for Memorial COC, all the churches in the study reside in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. All churches in the study are urban locales.

The following chart details more specifically the size and histories of each COC:

Table 1: Church Profile

Church Name	Location	Membership	Average Weekly Attendance	Years in Existence
Brown Street Church of Christ	Waxahachie, Texas	850	700	50 years
Lewisville Church of Christ	Lewisville, Texas	750	550	26 years
McDermott Road Church of Christ	Plano, Texas	1000	800	24 years
Memorial Church of Christ	Houston, Texas	1000	800	65 years
Shawnee Trail Church of Christ	Frisco, Texas	600	500	23 years

Upon receiving permission from the lead minister, “devoted” and “new” members in the five churches were first contacted by this researcher by phone to secure their willingness and participation. Agreeable participants were emailed questionnaires composed by this researcher. Finally, through the usage of Zoom, the researcher asked each population group (listed above) for further clarification and understanding for their respective answers. Findings from this study were too valuable to leave to assumption or human bias.

The instrumentation of qualitative research subjects itself to the experience more than the data (Englander, 2012). Therefore, this researcher sought to compose and utilize instrumentation that captured the morale and heart of churches through more categories than traceable attendance and charitable giving. This researcher's goal was to discover the "why" for growth (or decline), more than the "what", within COC.

Different questionnaires observed the following protocols:

1. A questionnaire for "devoted" members concerning their perceptions of the lead minister's greatest strengths, greatest weaknesses, and his overall relationships with the church.
2. A questionnaire for "new" members, confirming why they chose their respective COC, and how that decision related to the lead minister's greatest strengths, greatest weaknesses, and overall relationships with the church.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews through video conferencing software. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through Fathom. Recordings were saved on the researcher's computer and backed up through iCloud and OneDrive software. The anonymity of the research participants was protected through pseudonyms.

Organized religion has faced, and is currently facing, tremendous challenges in a post-Christian America (Barna, 2016). However, the church should not lose hope. The future remains secure in the hands of Jesus Christ (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 16:18). Lead ministers in COC must be keenly aware of how they can be uniquely effective in the years and decades to come. Through the lived experiences of churches and their members, the following chapters will address these important stories and heartfelt feedback.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Upon hearing Peter's confession that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, Jesus made a beautiful promise to his apostles standing in his presence, and to generations of believers for millennia to follow when he said, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 16: 18). Jesus provided two undeniable promises through his famous affirmation of Peter's faith: one, it was Christ's church; and two, the church would never be destroyed. Followers of Jesus rest in blessed assurance that "membership" in the global church cannot, and will not, be terminated by any manmade or spiritual force of evil. The church will remain on earth, and it will reassemble in heaven at the throne of Jesus with the many "clouds of witnesses" who have gone to be with the Lord (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Hebrews 12:2)

Nevertheless, the church's image and functionality in society can, and does, certainly change. Currently, the church is losing its voice in America (Barna, 2016). For COC, a religious group affiliated with the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, the last sixty years have proven to be a difficult season. At one time, COC were known as the "fastest growing religious group in America" (Yeakley, 2008, p. 7), but since the 1980's, COC have been in a rapid decline (p. 18). This author sought to discover possible remedies to reverse this numerical trend and alleviate this spiritual discouragement. He also hoped to discern how much responsibility for church attrition rests on the shoulders of church leadership. Is the decline attributed to COC doctrine, COC traditions, or leadership struggles which lead ministers can combat through their preaching, personality, and pastoral service?

To address a topic of this persuasion, this author carefully examined and selected sources for his literature review. He began by utilizing the Liberty University (LU) database at his disposal as a LU doctoral student. In the online database search, he geared his search of online books, journal articles, and reviews to church leadership and church growth. The scope of this search opened the door to authors, students, and consultants of church growth across evangelical America.

After perusing the LU database, the author refined his approach to a specific focus of writers and church growth students within COC. Discoveries about church growth or decline within COC differ from studies within the United States evangelical church network. Doctrinal differences and leadership structures in COC, particularly in the lead minister's role within COC, must also be considered within the scope of a study of church growth within COC. Though similar in many ways to Southern Baptist, community, and nondenominational churches, COC possess unique beliefs and leadership organization which must be kept in full view.

After considering church growth resources within American churches at large, and then more specifically, COC, the author reached out to his network of ministry colleagues to survey resources and works they had personally found helpful and challenging in their own ministries. The personal recommendations of colleagues shaped the research to another dimension of ministry, leadership, and personal development. Many of these resources were geared toward more practical than scholarly summaries, yet for this author, they were still helpful.

Finally, this author was mindful not to use outdated sources. Church growth studies and trends cited in this project have been limited to the past two decades. A few sources scattered throughout the project can be traced to the last forty years, but these sources address the discipline of preaching and the timeless advice therein. The ability to connect with people is a

talent not bound by the turn of the calendar. People are reached through different ways in different seasons, but connection is ultimately governed by the heart.

A variety of topics and subtopics within the study of preaching and church growth were covered in this research project. Exploration ranged from effective communication and oration to the emotional commitment of pastoral ministry. Without fail, the sanctity and discipline of a lead minister's personal life, faith, and discipleship were called into question, and different sources helped define the diverse characteristics of a spiritually driven and balanced herald of truth. Every source offered unique, helpful counsel for lead ministers becoming more effective in their respective ministries and callings.

Theological Framework Introduction

The summons to church leadership and ministry is a heavenly calling supplied by eternal significance. It is not an invitation geared for every soul, as preachers are subjected to unique spiritual scrutiny. Lutzer (1987) described the calling of clergy thus, "I do not see how anyone could survive in the ministry if he felt it was his own choice" (p. 9). James, the brother of Jesus, joined the caution by lovingly warning his audience, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 3:1). To be a gospel herald and spiritual shepherd is a distinct privilege, and it must be approached with devout reverence, sincere humility, and faithful vigilance.

This author sought to discover if church growth is connected to the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within COC. A 2013 study of Presbyterian churches in Canada attributed church growth to effective preaching, inspirational worship, and children's programs (Randall, 2013, p. 22), but is the same true for COC in Texas? Are growing churches blooming

because of lead ministers who fully embrace their calling and diligently understand their ministries?

As traced and documented throughout Holy Scripture, a minister's spiritual job description is matchlessly diversified, demanding various skills and duties. Churches are value-driven organizations, thus requiring leaders to sustain tradition while also balancing the need for innovation (Grandy, 2013, p. 619). Lead ministers must wear different hats and operate in diverse spaces and realms. To that the end, for the purposes of this project, the following virtues and attributes will be reviewed: lead minister as teacher, lead minister as pastor, and lead minister as mentor, and Old Testament and New Testament foundations of leadership. It is imperative for a lead minister to cognitively trace and emotionally connect his profession and calling to biblical admonition.

The study of effective lead ministers is connected to the Christ's purpose for his church. The church, the "ecclesia,"—is a gathering of those who have been washed by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. The church launched on the Day of Pentecost as detailed in Acts 2. The author of the book, Luke the physician, recorded what the early church did, how they functioned, and why they gathered with the following words,

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor

of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved
(*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 2: 42-47).

The church came together to study, to commune, to serve, to grow, and to love each other and the communities in which it resides. The church gathers today for the same purpose, and it needs strong leadership to help continue moving its purpose forward.

Lead Minister as Teacher

A student of Scripture cannot ignore the New Testament's emphasis on effective proclamation of God's truth. Faith develops by the teaching of God's word (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 10:17). The apostle Paul rhetorically, strategically, and intentionally asked, "How can they hear without someone preaching to them" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 10:14)? From Paul to Timothy to Jesus, the need for biblical teaching is clearly established. John Piper (2018), a modern-day master teacher in his own right, connects tangible expression of worship with effective biblical preaching (p. 51).

The Discipline of Study (2 Timothy 2:15)

Paul and Timothy shared a close relationship best defined as a mentor/mentee partnership. Paul offered Timothy not only valuable advice, but inspired instruction for his ministry in the thriving city of Ephesus. Timothy's effectiveness would be connected to his ability to publicly proclaim the deep truths of God's word. To prepare him for the task, Paul exhorted the young spokesman, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2:15). To stand before the gathered church to communicate on behalf of the Almighty is a terrific task that cannot be approached casually or attempted spontaneously, and it requires adequate preparation. Biblical preaching must be

“biblically saturated, derived, faithful, and balanced” (Piper, 2018, p. 64). COC value and expect rational thought, the authority of Scripture, and intellectual debate (Casey, 2004, p. 490). For a lead minister to be an effective communicator and teacher in COC, he must be a lifelong student. The best teachers are avid students.

Spiritual Ability (1 Timothy 4:13-14)

Paul intentionally reminded Timothy that his preaching would not solely derive from human ability. Timothy’s teaching would be connected to a heavenly source and spiritual engine. Paul explained, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4:13-14). Timothy was officially commissioned by the apostles in Jerusalem (elders) to fulfill his ministry, and one of Timothy’s duties which could not be overlooked (“neglected”) was the teaching of God’s word. Preaching must pump a preacher’s heart, propelling him forward until he cannot wait to preach the word of God again (Lutzer, 1987, p. 33). Preaching is not a 9-5 job where a lead minister “clocks in” and “clocks out”. It is a lifestyle and calling to be fully embraced.

The Teaching Focus of Jesus (Mark 1:38)

Jesus Christ is repeatedly described in the New Testament as “healer,” “uniter,” and “miracle worker,” and Christ certainly accomplished these tasks in his earthly ministry, but when carefully listening to Jesus’s self-proclaimed ministry focus, an emphasis on preaching and teaching emerges. Early one morning, Jesus said to his disciples, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Mark 1: 38). Jesus was committed to a healthy rhythm of teaching. He

yearned to be a voice of good news and harbinger of the new age of salvation (Guelich, 1989, p. 71). Jesus did not solely heal diseases, disrupt the status quo, or condemn the religious elite. By his own admission, Jesus came to preach and teach, and by doing so, he advanced the work of the Kingdom. If Jesus viewed preaching and teaching as fundamental to Kingdom growth, lead ministers should own their vocation with the same vision and passion.

Lead Minister as Pastor

A lead minister dampens his calling and weakens his influence when his ministerial responsibilities do not extend beyond the lectern. Effective lead ministers are intentionally involved in the lives of people. Andrew Root (2013), in his book, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves*, observed, “You can only be called pastor, as a mother can only be called mother, because there is a relationship that gives you this personal relationship, this identity” (p. 68). Based on Root’s observation, it would stand to reason that COC should not employ only preachers or teachers, but ministers. Before offering instruction, they must provide companionship. Scripture highlights the importance of shepherding as much as teaching.

Doctrine and Life (1 Timothy 4:16)

Paul reminded Timothy that he should not just guard his teaching, but also his character. “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4:16). It would be tragic for Timothy to teach the wrong information (“doctrine”), but it would be equally catastrophic if Timothy exemplified the wrong behavior (“life”). When church leaders make poor life decisions, churches embody minimal respect for ordained ministers (Keck, 2014). Though challenging, this stigma can eventually be overcome, but only through virtuous, biblical discipleship. An effective lead minister is an effective shepherd, and effective shepherding

requires both instruction and example. Styles (2019) noted, “The effects of a leader’s decision usually impact all members of an organization” (p. 3). A lead minister must prayerfully lead and diligently live in the spirit of Christ.

Biblical Shepherding (John 10:10)

Jesus proclaimed himself to be “The Good Shepherd” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 10:10), and his “goodness” included physical, emotional, and spiritual proximity to the sheep. Bredenhoff (2021) illustrated the shepherding nature of Jesus and pastoral ministry thus,

For just as being a biological parent is not limited to the task of conceiving a child and bringing her into the world, so being a pastor is not restricted to the task of founding a congregation or through the initial efforts of evangelistic or missionary preaching. In fact, for both roles, the greater task remains that in nurturing or caring for the ‘offspring’ in the coming years (p. 28).

According to Jesus, the sheep so personally knew his voice, they could discern an imposter in their midst (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 10:5). Effective lead ministers are purposefully juxtaposed to the sheep. People yearn to tell their stories to anyone who will listen (Root, 2013, p. 191). Lead ministers intuitively become listening ears for the sheep through devoted shepherding and pastoring.

Lead Minister as Mentor

If a lead minister cannot model a reputable and godly life, he cannot have a meaningful, long-term ministry. Every man commits sins (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 3:23), but a lead minister should adhere to godly standards, even in his sinfulness. Churches should avoid placing lead ministers on too high of a pedestal, but they should also evade diluting

the charge and responsibilities of ministry. Keck (2014) offered a balanced analysis when he penned, “Healthy congregations thrive because their pastors keep everyone’s attention on Christ. Faithful pastors thrive because their congregations are focused on God” (p. 48). An unstable, predictable lead minister, will likely lead to an unstable, unpredictable, dying church.

Spiritual Advisors (2 Timothy 3:14)

Paul encouraged Timothy to stay the course because of what he had heard, but also *who* he had heard it from. He imparted to the young preacher, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 3:14). Timothy learned from reputable sources, and Paul encouraged Timothy to ground his faith in that special upbringing. Similarly, lead ministers should be regarded as credible sources of biblical authority and practice. Biblical teaching, separate from morals and ethics, is simply disruptive noise (Cook, 2018, p. 32).

Spiritual Examples (1 Corinthians 11:1)

When writing to the church at Corinth, infested with troubling challenges and internal conflicts, Paul designated his life as a prototype of faith, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul’s letter to the Corinthians provides an invaluable insight into the social world of his converts and the problems they encountered when they embraced his beliefs, as well what it must have been like to attend early Christian gatherings (Wilson, 1997, p. 163). In the minutia of social deconstructs and carnal majority, Paul served as a stable lighthouse. By imitating his example, and listening to his teaching, the apostle boldly claimed that the Corinthians would become more closely aligned with the expectations of Christ.

As critics evaluate Paul's self-promotion, some details remain in full view. In other writings, Paul hastened to highlight his own flaws and shortcomings (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 1:13-14). Additionally, Paul only pointed the Corinthians to his life because he was earnestly striving to pattern his life after Christ. Elsewhere, Paul displayed his obsession to be like Christ, defining everything as "rubbish" compared to truly knowing Jesus (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Philippians 3: 7-8). Paul's boasting was in the Lord. An effective lead minister should be capable of offering the same model to his congregation. As lead he points people to Jesus, his personal life can (and should) be a roadmap for the journey.

New Testament Foundations for Effective Leadership

The New Testament does not leave emerging leaders clueless in advice and direction for shepherding God's people. Numerous paradigms can be found for Christ-centered leadership. The following examples hold prominent consideration.

The Seven Servants

As the church in Jerusalem was rapidly growing, Grecian widows were unfortunately neglected. The elders in Jerusalem wisely chose seven men to help distribute food so the elders could focus on matters of greater spiritual significance (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 6:3). Specifically, the servants were to be, "full of the Spirit and wisdom" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 6:3). "Full of the Spirit" included possessing spiritual gifts, but also walking according to the Spirit and living a "Spirit-filled" life (Sheerer, 2001). Lead ministers should possess these same spiritual attributes, and they must be held accountable to congruent spiritual expectations. They are representations of those who also strive to follow the Spirit of God.

This sense of service was not confined to Jerusalem. In writing to the church at Thessalonica, the apostle Paul fondly described the depth of their relationship. Looking back at their shared history, Paul said, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Thessalonians 2:8). He would write in the next few verses, “For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Thessalonians 2:19-20).

James, the brother of Jesus, was quick to condemn a life that claimed faith but lacked action. Specifically, James declared, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 2:26). By pointing to biblical models such as Rahab and Abraham, the biblical author offers evidence that verbal faith must be backed by physical, obedient action. This conviction was as true for the believers scattered abroad in the Diaspora as the saints in Thessalonica and Jerusalem (Sheerer, 2001).

Qualifications of Elders and Deacons

One of Timothy’s responsibilities in Ephesus, and Titus’s responsibilities in Crete, was to ordain and assemble team leadership. Elders possessed greater spiritual oversight and deacons played a more hands on approach to daily ministry and service. In 1 Timothy 3: 1-12 and in Titus 1: 5-9, Paul lists spiritual qualifications, or qualities, for men to serve in such capacities. The early church was attempting to undertake the world for Christ, and leaders in such an enterprise had to be men whose heroic spirit was founded on character and basic virtues of honesty and sobriety (Buttrick, 1955). Though many years have passed since the first century church, spiritual virtues such as “temperate, self-controlled, hospitable” (*New International Version*,

1978/2011, 1 Timothy 3:3) should overlap, translate, and uniquely drive contemporary ministry. Without these spiritual qualifications, the effectiveness of service and the deepening of faith are dubious.

The Supremacy of Christ

A lead minister must recognize his hierarchal paradigm for submission. He ultimately submits to Christ as the “chief cornerstone” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Ephesians 2:20). Christ holds the supremacy and all things have been placed under his feet (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Ephesians 1:22). A lead minister walks on the edge of an abyss when he believes that he holds the ultimate authority. “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 3:11). Sheerer (2001) observed, “No one can blame the defects of the building when the foundation is Jesus Christ” (p. 699). It is difficult to criticize a lead minister who manifests the heart of Jesus.

Commitment to Biblical Authority

When Paul was instructing Timothy, Paul described the seriousness of Timothy’s assignment thus, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 4:2). For the inspired apostle, preaching was a holy task, driven by divine initiatives. Paul would write in the following verses,

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of

an evangelist, discharge all duties of your ministry (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2: 3-5).

Timothy was to be laser-focused on mission and ministry, striving for excellence.

Old Testament Foundations for Effective Leadership

The New Testament is not the only biblical source for healthy leadership. The Old Testament is full of stories and examples of leaders who accomplished great feats and leaders who encapsulated vast potential even through heartbreaking devastation. Joshua made decisions through the help of God's Spirit, as did Moses and other Old Testament leaders (Styles, 2019, p. 2). A key variance in faithful and unfaithful leaders rests in the purity of their hearts.

Differences in Kings

Saul and David both reigned over the throne of Israel for four decades. Both were great warriors and talented motivators of people. Saul's kingship was negatively tarnished by paranoia and jealousy. Contrarily, David's kingship was strengthened by submission to God's will. Though David was not immune to selfish mistakes and carnal rebellion, David repeatedly returned to God's expectations for his life and his kingship, as the "man after God's own heart" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Samuel 13:14). Coffman (1992) noted, "it is evident that in the character of David, despite his weakness and sins, there was an invariable purpose of honoring God as the true king" (p. 154). Like Saul, a lead minister will struggle from his own shortcomings, but like David, his identity must be patterned by God.

The Detriment of Pride

The sin of pride can be public or private, but pride is undoubtedly a destructive altercation - a "treason or idolatry against God" (Setran, 2016, p. 61). Committing "treason" is a spiritual felony that guarantees self-destruction. King Solomon, speaking from personal

experience, penned, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Proverbs 11:2). Remembering his past, Solomon also wrote, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Proverbs 16:18). Solomon recalled, “A man’s pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Proverbs 29:23). Pride positions a lead minister’s heart above the congregation, and it convinces him that his words are the only words which matter (Setran, 2016, p. 65). For a lead minister to harvest effectiveness, pride must be kept at bay.

Theological Framework Conclusion

To serve as a church leader is a holy task. A clear precedent for the proclamation of God’s inspired word indisputably exists in the Bible, but a lead minister’s behavior is equally important as the instruction he brings. His heart and soul must drive his work, and the purity of his life must shine brightly.

Theoretical Framework Introduction

A heavenly drive to pursue earthly endeavors energizes the calling of ministry. A lead minister inherently understands and passionately believes that he serves a higher being, working for the Lord, not for men (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 3: 23-24). A lead minister should develop biblical worldviews and formulate committed discipleship in the hearts and minds of congregants (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 3:2). Preaching is a devout and distinguished profession, one which even the apostle Paul humbly asked, “and who is equal to such a task” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Corinthians 2:16).

When a lead minister cogitates his work from a spiritual lens and practical platform, he must quantify daily expectations of his profession. Subjective giftedness and intellectual

savviness should accompany his desire to serve. James, the brother of Jesus, counseled that the task is not suited for all. The words “not many of you should presume to be teachers” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 3:1) is a spiritual warning. The lead minister’s abilities for connecting to, relating with, and challenging an audience, will be reviewed as a theoretical social science foundation for the life and profession of a lead minister in COC. A man should not be terrified to be a lead minister, but he must reverently enter the profession.

The Contingency Leadership Theory

Fred E. Fiedler was a philosopher and theorist who influenced the field and discipline of leadership. Fiedler’s writings contribute to understanding the undercurrents of leadership within COC. Known for his development of the Contingency Leadership Theory, Fiedler challenged the notion that leaders can, or should adapt to their surroundings. On the contrary, Fiedler passionately advocated for the right person for the right situation. Fiedler (1995) defined the Leadership Contingency Theory as “a triumph of obstinacy over conventional wisdom” (p. 454). Likewise, it is imperative for lead ministers and COC to be properly partnered.

Fiedler earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in psychology. He completed a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Fiedler was a leading expert in diagnosing the intricacies of the human mind, but later in life, he devoted most of his effort and time to improving leadership initiatives and tasks-oriented goals (Fiedler, 1995). Rather than pushing for the development of a superlative leadership personality, Fiedler believed in a natural tendency to thrive in some situations more than others. Naturally, Fiedler also believed the reverse to be true—a natural tendency to *fail* in some situations more than others (Fiedler, 1995). In Fiedler’s mind, bringing the right leader and group together was supreme (Video, Ten Theories of Leadership in Five

Minutes, 3:05). As it relates to lead ministers and their relationship with respective COC, the dynamics of the Contingency Leadership Theory cannot be undervalued or overly scrutinized.

In the prime of Fiedler's career, America experienced a transitional shift from "management" to "leadership" prerogatives. Management and leadership, though similar in form, choose different paths to accomplish common goals. Northouse (2019) observed, if an organization has strong management without leadership, the outcome can be stifling and bureaucratic. Conversely, if an organization has strong leadership without management, the outcome can be meaningless or misdirected change for change's sake. To be effective, organizations need to nourish both competent management and skilled leadership (pp. 12-13).

Fiedler stood at the crossroads, paving paths for leadership while maintaining the need for harmonious management skills in American organizations, businesses, and communities. Fiedler established advantages for both leadership and management, while honoring their differences and celebrating their similarities. Fiedler believed leaders and managers alike deserved a seat at the table and advocated for such; it was imperative, however, that they occupy the right chairs. Not surprisingly, startup companies most often thrive when Contingency Leadership Theory practices are at play (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015, p. 213). COC should consider how they could thrive when the Contingency Leadership Theory is properly utilized. There are no governing boards or placement diocese for COC. Each congregation hires and retains their own lead ministers. It would stand to reason that connecting the right lead minister with the right COC is of paramount importance.

The Contingency Leadership Theory made a lasting impact in the secular realm, but it can also be helpful in church leadership disciplines in COC for the purposes of this study,

matching the right lead minister with the right COC. With a correct partnership, a long, fruitful ministry between the lead minister and a COC is probable.

Adaptation or Adoption?

Leadership and culture positively influence firm performance when leaders behave similarly to values espoused by an organization's existing culture (Hartnell, et. al, 2016). When leaders are properly placed in the right environments, the community enjoys progress and higher productivity. When leaders are misplaced, stagnant conflict ensues. Cultures may change, and the challenges accompanying the times may also take a different route, but effective leaders are always needed.

Disagreement surfaces, however, when great minds debate what type of leader is required. The deliberation also includes where to find the leader, how to cultivate him, and when or where he will be the most effective. A gap often exists between what a leader claims to be and what he is (Finkelstein, et. al, 2009). Some believe that time will develop rising stars. Others believe that through patience and careful instruction, a zebra can change its stripes, as a leader can adapt to his surroundings, step out of his comfort zone, and achieve incredible results. Fiedler, on the other hand, subscribed to a different paradigm. The right leader adopts the situation, rather than adapts to a situation. With the Contingency Leadership Theory, the leader's default style is fixed. There is not a push, or even a hopeful possibility, of the leader developing new skills for a new challenge.

The Contingency Leadership Theory began to materialize as a plausible alternative to behavioral leadership theories, stating that there is no optimum style of leadership, but leaders thrive when they are positioned in optimum circumstances (Harrison, 2018, p. 27). Coach A should be hired to lead Team A because the personalities most evenly align, and Coach B should

be hired to lead Team B for the same reason. Coach A, while he might be able to survive leading Team B, should not be assigned the task, because he will thrive leading Team A. Once again, the same is true for Coach B. When personalities, procedures, and expectations mesh, advantageous results flow (Video, Ten Theories of Leadership in Five Minutes, 3:47).

Chance (2013) boiled Fiedler's entire platform down to two main directives: the personality of the leader and the degree of difficulty of the situation (p. 113). In both directives, the emphasis is placed on the leader's capability and veracity to attack the present challenge, not an unknown or unmeasured task. Vroom (2007) noted that according to Fielder, "Leadership motivation is a rather enduring characteristic that is not subject to change or adaptation" (p. 20). Leaders are permanent fixtures who commit to long haul objectives, but they produce the greatest work within their natural wheelhouse of abilities. For lead ministers in COC, this would include, but not be limited to, finding the right church to serve.

Diligent Discernment

Contingency Leadership Theory warrants discernment in the leader or community which empowers him (Waters, 2013). Unfortunately, discernment does not flow with constant supply. It rises and falls by supply and demand and most often dwells in scarcity. Nevertheless, the quest for discernment should be exhaustively executed.

Kotter (2012) argued that nothing disrupts an organization as much as behavior which is inconsistent with the vision of an organization. In any organization, discernment must be utilized by employers before employment is offered. Acquiring the right people for the right situation makes all the difference. Concerning practitioners of the Contingency Leadership Theory, Waters (2013) made the following observation, "If a situation between an organization and its public is negative (e.g., a crisis), then the task-oriented practitioner will turn to the crisis

communication plan and follow specific instructions for managing the crisis” (p. 338).

“Managing the crisis” is habitually defined as the termination of the leader and the immediate search for his replacement. Unfortunately, hasty fires and rushed hires are common. If the organization had diligently researched the candidate before the relationship was confirmed, the “crisis” may have been averted.

For lead ministers in COC, and the elderships who hire them, the Contingency Leadership Theory can shape hiring and firing practices, networking, and long-term objectives. by effectively matching lead ministers and COC. In the process of selecting a lead minister, several questions should be strategically asked by the elders, and skills carefully evaluated, to assure a healthy partnership is secured (Newton, 2020). This, of course, requires the eldership to be diligent in knowing the COC they oversee. In addition to interview and personality assessments, the following characteristics should drive the process of discernment throughout the lead minister’s tenure: (a) The lead minister’s connection to the audience, (b) the lead minister’s relation to the congregation, and (c) the lead minister’s ability to challenge and to guide.

The Lead Minister’s Connection to the Audience

Preaching the gospel is not the same discipline as delivering a public speech. Though an effective lead minister engages an audience, he does not simply impart information. He is not an entertainer seeking a good laugh. He is a herald speaking holiness into the lives of those who want, and need, a better understanding of the Creator (Day, 2005).

Preaching the gospel is an art and a science (Cox, 2012). Communication theories can be studied, but the lead minister must still deliver a powerful message through the brokenness of his own life. If a lead minister is speaking to an audience that most suits his own personality and

context, as described by the Contingency Leadership Theory, communication could be even more effective.

Proposed Interview Question 1: What is it like to sit and listen to your lead minister?

Fred Craddock (2011) described the nature of storytelling preaching through these illustrious comparisons,

The great single power in storytelling is the power of identification. You go to the theatre. You sit in front of the television. What makes something gripping at the theatre, to make you say, “I just want to go back and see it?” You go somewhere with friends, to a restaurant after the theatre, and you cannot even talk. You just stare at the cup in silence. What happened? You identified with that drama or one of the characters. Nobody during the play came out and said, “I want to challenge you today. I have three points about this tonight” (p. 34).

Storytelling preaching provides meaning, creativity, and wonder. Craddock (2011) also studied and modeled inductive preaching, where a preacher holds an audience’s attention to the end of his message and then supplies the main point, rather than telling the audience the direction of his sermon at the beginning of the message, almost ensuring that their minds will wander. Stories, however, keep audiences engaged. It is no surprise that even Jesus, the Son of God, used stories, “parables”, more than any other method for his teaching and preaching (Sheerer, 2001). Effective lead ministers must be effective storytellers (Kuruvilla, 2019).

Craddock also recommends reminiscent preaching. To deeply connect with an audience, a lead minister should remind of biblical truths they have previously understood. Craddock (2011) observed, “The power of Paul’s theology is in the fact that when he uses it, he is not introducing it for the first time; he is reminding them of what they already know” (p. 16). There

is an inherent temptation for lead ministers to believe that they must impress their congregants with new theories and complex theological language to boost intellectual capabilities, but one of the best ways to captivate an audience is to simply remind of the heritage of faith, which they have believed and practiced, that has survived centuries of persecution (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 15:2-3).

The Lead Minister's Relation to the Congregation

An effective lead minister carries his ministry well beyond the lectern. He enters the deep, dark, and troubling spaces of life, just like Jesus, who took on flesh and mingled with people (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 1:14). The apostle Paul strived to become all things to all men (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 9:22), wherever his missionary journeys led him. So critical is the ability to relate with people that pastors must protect themselves from “compassion fatigue” (Sneglar, et. al, 2017). Caring for churches takes a physical, emotional, and spiritual toll, but it is a critical sacrifice effective lead ministers wisely make. If personalities are correctly matched, emotional wear and tear may not be as severe.

Schaller (1986) recommended that during a lead minister's honeymoon period with the church (the first year), his focus should be devoted to learning the people and culture of the congregation so that meaningful relationships can be developed (p. 11). According to Schaller, these efforts will be the saving grace to remaining in his position. Church members may be more moved by a lead minister's presence in their homes or hospital room than by his sermons or Bible class presentations. Effective ministry is not just about how a lead minister teaches, but more importantly, what a lead minister does. The sheep need a shepherd who is devoted to them every day, not just on Sundays (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4:16).

The Lead Minister's Ability to Challenge and to Guide

Excellent communication and seasoned pastoral care serve as foundational skills for effective lead ministers. There is, however, an inherent talent to excellent communication and competent pastoral care—the ability to challenge and to guide. The writer of Hebrews exhorted his audience concerning the nature of church relationships and brotherly love in this way,

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Hebrews 10:24-25).

Comparing these divine instructions to the platform of the Contingency Leadership Theory, one personality might better suit one church. A church in an urban setting might be more challenged and inspired by a lead minister who most identifies with urban culture. The same is true for churches in rural settings with lead ministers who have rural backgrounds. From a biblical and theological perspective, lead ministers must inspire churches for the glory of God (Cueva, 2020, p. 147). Personalities are inherently involved.

Peter urged Christians to continue to “grow in the grace the knowledge of Jesus” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Peter 3:18). A lead minister helps drive the process. The lead minister is tasked with the responsibility to bring the church and the Bible together (Craddock, 2011, p. 11). Through outstanding sermons and exemplary living, he mentors the gathered church in their journey with Jesus.

Theoretical Framework Conclusion

To serve as a lead minister is a challenging endeavor. It is honorable when a man accepts the calling to speak on behalf of Almighty God and to serve as a shepherd, but in addition to his

spiritual caliber, his personal skills must also be carefully considered. He must effectively communicate to, emotionally resonate with, and spiritually inspire those whom he serves.

Related Literature and Rationale Introduction

Organized religion across America is struggling to secure a promising future. In his book, *America at the Crossroads: Explosive Trends Shaping America's Future and What You Can Do About It*, George Barna (2016) bluntly stated, "The faith realm is in turmoil. In 2005, two-thirds of American religious adults said that their faith was important to them. Just ten years later that has slipped to half" (p. 19). Barna published his book in 2016, and since publication, worship attendance numbers have continued to decline while Barna's predictions have remained constant. Barna (2016) explained,

A careful study of Americans' core beliefs reveals a nation in transition, moving from a predominantly Judeo-Christian point of view to a mostly postmodern, secular worldview. The transition has been both rapid and monumental in its ramifications, as seen in the breathtakingly quick acceptance of same-sex marriage and the widespread acceptance of government authority. Those who have strategically tracked the shift in our central faith tenets have seen the cultural earthquake coming for some time (p. 19).

COC in Texas are not immune to the numerical decline Barna described on a national level. Though some COC are growing in different regions of the country (Yeakley, 2008), Texas included, this author desires to see COC across the board regain a promising future. The following considerations should accompany that process (Craddock, 2011).

Effective Communication

Some lead ministers soar in communication abilities while others severely struggle. It seems improbable to diagnose a single culprit. People listen to and benefit from sermons

differently. No two persons or audiences are alike (Johnson, 1938), but even though congregations (and individuals) have various learning styles, basic communication skills still come into play (Cox, 2012).

Preaching is a spiritual gift and a divine anointing (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 4: 1-5). To continually feed a church with spiritual insight is a tough assignment, and preaching must be as captivating as it is informative (Kyle, 2017). Kyle noted, “Entertainment, indeed, is a necessary ingredient for holding the attention of an audience” (p. 145). “Entertainment” is not grounded in humor, but the ability to captivate an audience and maintain their interest throughout the period of teaching (p. 146).

The Lead Minister’s Development

Effective preaching is not channeled through osmosis, but developed through humility, perseverance, and time. Most of all, effective preaching is focused on the message more than the messenger. Effective proclaimers of the gospel preach Christian sermons rather than “pseudo-gospels” (Alcántara, 2019, p. 22). This would include, but not be limited to, diluting God to a distant force (deism), or promising that God will repeatedly, and uncharacteristically, reward his people with abundant prosperity and good fortune (often defined as the “health and wealth” gospel). In Christ-centered, biblical sermons, the “who” is just as important as the “what” or the “how”. Weak biblical theology produces weak churches, as foundations of faith are built on shallow teachings and catchy phrases tailored for social media response (Cueva, 2020).

Vines and Shaddix (2017) offered this interesting analysis about improving effectiveness, “Effective style is a combination of the preacher’s personality and craftsmanship” (p. 225). Introverted lead ministers “come alive” when standing before an audience in sermon delivery, but carrying on a one-on-one conversation can be exhausting (Alcántara, 2019). Still, according

to Vines and Shaddix, solely focusing on the mechanics or methods for preaching is not the only caveat for effective ministry and pastoring.

In writing sermons with different sermon structures, it is wise to listen to preaching experts. Haddon Robinson offered, “Writing out the sermon before delivering it orally improves preaching because it allows you (the preacher) to work out in advance the right words and clear ideas for communicating the message” (Carter, 2005, p. 84). Andrew W. Blackwood (1882–1966), a trainer of preachers, commented, “the man who would learn how to preach may approach the subject in one of three ways: the science of homiletics, the art of preaching, and the study of sermons” (Massey, 1980, p. 157).

Some lead ministers deliver sermons without notes. Some lead ministers strategically use bullet points. Some lead ministers are prone to preach narrative-style sermons, while others rely on classic, expository (verse-by-verse) preaching. Defining a perfect, more effective “style” of preaching is dubious at best (Lutzer, 1987). Haddon Robinson masterfully used notes, defending his conviction that writing out the sermons before preaching them insured greater effectiveness. Fred Craddock deferred to narrative style preaching. Regardless of which “style” the lead minister chooses, a lead minister must embrace hard work and preparation. Smith (2019) described it in the following manner: “No matter the individual work pattern, nothing takes the place of hard, hard work. Too few are willing to devote the tremendous amount of time and energy necessary to produce the best preaching of which we are capable” (p. 106). Even though it requires grueling commitment, developing preaching and pastoral effectiveness is tangibly possible. Vines and Shaddix (2017) compellingly argued, “A man can learn the basic principles of preaching. If elephants can be trained to dance, lions to play, and leopards to hunt, surely preachers can be taught to preach” (p. 17).

Engaging the Room

A man can be a great orator and communicator, but preaching the gospel is not limited to oral communication (Cardo & Gallagher, 2021). Relational bonds and emotional competence drive effectiveness (Darling, 2019).

Proposed Interview Question 2: How would you describe your lead minister's preaching?

It is difficult to earn the privilege to speak the truth in someone's life if a personal connection has not been initially secured. Several writers and students of preaching offer helpful counsel for engaging audiences. The advice travels well beyond speaking techniques and sermon composition (Harrington & Lewis, 2017).

Proposed Interview Question 3: What keeps you connected to a lead minister?

A good sermon is one that strikes a balance between abstraction and imagery (Carter, 2005). Abstraction stimulates the heart while imagery challenges the brain. It is the difference between an analytical and emotional response.

Delivering a sermon is like a journey (Allen, 2013). There is a beginning to the expedition, as well as a finale, but what happens in between is most influential. Carter's (2005) observation—of striking a balance between “abstraction” and “imagery” is peculiarly applicable. Not every faith concept or biblical plea can be, or should be, explained through tangible terms. A lead minister must invite his congregation on the same journey in the sermon that he enjoyed during the preparation of the message (Allen, 2013). In the obscurity of imagination and out-of-the-box thinking, sermons formalize new meaning and significance.

A lead minister effectively engaging an audience is just as much about him knowing the audience as his sermon delivery, creativity, or subject matter. Kuruvilla (2019) observed,

“Preachers must remember, however, that the closer the message is to the needs of the listeners—or the better they have created felt needs that match the thrust and force of the text—the less importance of nonverbal communication” (p. 201). In the same vein as leading listeners on a journey through the sermon, the best way to plan the journey’s itinerary is to know what is happening in the lives, hearts, and minds, of the audience. According to Allen (2013), the more the lead minister can know his audience, the more effective he will be,

The key to selecting a focus for a series is pastoral listening. At one level, the preacher should attend to what the congregation explicitly says they want. At another level, the preacher needs to listen to the story behind the story, that is, to the larger network of experiences, issues, ideas, and relations that is going on (or not going on) in the congregation and in the wider world about which the congregation needs greater theological clarity or missional direction (p. 75).

These laudable goals cannot be accomplished if the preacher does not know the sheep by being involved in their lives (Darling, 2019). Jesus said that a good shepherd knows the sheep, and the sheep know a good shepherd’s voice (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 10:4).

Proposed Interview Question 4: When do you feel the most shepherded by your lead minister?

Meaningful Service

Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica was built on camaraderie. Many of Paul’s letters were authored from a distance while he was in prison, but even with long-distance correspondence rather than face-to-face interaction, the conversations picked up where they left off previously. Good communication starts on a personal level (Harrington & Lewis, 2017 p. 57). A lead minister’s sermons improve when the homilies are expressed through daily life, visiting,

counseling, and engaging his church outside of the sanctuary, the church's engagement strengthens in the sanctuary (Vroom, et al. 2007). Preaching does not make a man a preacher (Vines and Shaddix, 2017). Though it may be the most public evidence of his ministry, it is certainly not an exhaustible evaluation.

Faith in Action

In the same way that faith without deeds is useless (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 2:26), preaching without faithful living is also futile. Behind a preacher's public teaching of the Word is his own devotion to the Word—he must digest it first (Merida, 2009). Jesus said of the Pharisees, “you must do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 23:3). How tragic if congregations perceive in their lead ministers what Jesus perceived in the Pharisees!

Proposed Interview Question 5: How would you define a “scriptural message?”

Rainer (2003) has defined the best ways to reach the “unchurched” (defined as those who believe in Jesus, but do not have a church home or claim any religious affiliation). In reaching “unchurched individuals,” Rainer reported, “Unchurched men and women will be likely to engage you in a conversation if they happen to discover you are a Christian” (p. 183). The “unchurched” will consider a discussion concerning Christianity when the “unchurched” discover that the individual on the other side of the conversation is a Christian. Furthermore, the “unchurched” will not realize that they are communicating with a Christian until true, Christ-centered, New Testament Christianity is manifested and expressed through the life of the Christian. Actions speak louder than words. The same is true for a lead minister. The very best sermons are lived from the overflow of scriptural preaching.

Missional Focus

“Rather than being fishers of men, the church is more focused on being keepers of the aquarium.” This picturesque quote, attributed to various influential voices such as Paul Harvey, indicts the heart of many lead ministers. Lead ministers can unfortunately, and unintentionally, spend more time on keeping the saved happy than reaching the lost. The morale of the church positively escalates when the church recaptures its central mission (Merida, 2009). Jesus outlined the Kingdom’s marching orders when he said, “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 28: 19-20). Biblical preaching envisions the church existing for the world, not for itself (Day, 2005, p. 248). As lead ministers consider personal methods to improve effectiveness and influence, a lead minister must dream bigger. Gospel proclamation pulls the lost from the world and propels them into the saving arms of Christ (Rainer, 2003). Evangelistic preaching produces evangelistic churches. Evangelistic churches are growing churches (Bredenhof, 2021).

Rainer (2003) observed, “If Christians do not invite non-Christians to church, we cannot be surprised if Christians do not share the gospel or influence the unchurched” (p. 26). Attitudes reflect leadership. Churches follow the steps lead ministers pave. A lead minister’s effectiveness is often tied to not only how he is viewed outside of the pulpit, but why. Leaving a legacy should be a lead minister’s top concern. Regarding the leaving of legacies, Smith (2019) described it thus,

The apostle Paul left many legacies: the legacy of his own gospel faithfulness, the legacy of churches planted, the legacy of his inspired writings, and the legacy of his patient

endurance of suffering; one of the often-overlooked legacies is his legacy of preachers.

Paul was a mentor. He was constantly investing in people (p. 38).

Effective lead ministers intentionally enter the people business. Through investing in people, they invest in their present and future reputation.

Inspiration and Motivation

To this point, this author has tied a lead minister's effectiveness to his ability to develop and deliver sermons, as well as his becoming one with the audience he addresses on a weekly basis. The vitality of innovative sermon crafting, and the deepening of personal relationships cannot be undervalued. Yet, there is an additional component to a lead minister's effectiveness, addressed in the following sections.

If a lead minister cannot inspire and motivate his audience, through his preaching and his life, his effectiveness will be minimal. A lead minister should encourage his church to be better tomorrow than it is today (Cueva, 2020). Borrowing from the vision of the apostle Paul, a lead minister must preach messages which exhort his sheep to, "Press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me (Paul) heavenward in Christ Jesus" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Philippians 3: 14).

Faith is a journey of spiritual progression. One cannot stand still in his discipleship and convictions (Carter, 2005). A lead minister's preaching plays a huge role in that process. Cox (2012) stated, "Preaching with intentionality challenges the brain of the listener" (p. 71). The following characteristics shape preaching that can inspire, motivate, and challenge, and preaching which sculpts cognitive conviction to reach for greater heights of spiritual maturity.

Proposed Interview Question 6: How would you define the word "pastoral"?

Equipping the Saints

Throughout the decades, various sermon styles have fashioned the preaching profession (Lutzer, 1987). Billy Graham preached loving, yet poignant sermons where thousands answered the call of Christ. Others have been more forceful, resorting to fear to stimulate a response. Notwithstanding preaching method, lead ministers should internalize that an essential part of any gospel message is to provide good cheer to those who need it (Ayer, 1967, p. 493). This author is reminded of one of his preaching professors in undergraduate study who said, “Give them (the church) heaven on Sunday, because they deal with hell all week.” Life is arduous, and the message of the cross instills joy. At times, preaching demands repentance, and repentance is a result of burdened distress (Smith, 2019). The apostle Paul reminded the church at Corinth, “Your sorrow led to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in anyway by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Corinthians 7: 9-10).

A consistent diet of preaching which is pointed at the heart of Jesus and the promise of the cross changes lives and maintains discipleship (Darling, 2019). Speaking of his own preaching style, Paul clarified, “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 2: 1-2). He then added, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might rest not on man’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 2:5). Preaching that gazes on the glory of the cross will eternally equip the gathered church.

COVID-19 taught lead ministers unique lessons about equipping the church. When churches dismissed gathered worship periods to slow the spread of the virus, a new paradigm developed for corporate worship gatherings. Many preachers who had never preached on camera were forced to add that skill to their repertoire. The pandemic proved the importance of churches building and maintaining a virtual presence (Plüss, 2020, p. 290). It also enlarged the lead minister's influence. Through YouTube, Facebook Live, Vimeo, or other streaming capabilities, a lead minister could preach to a new audience not assembled in the physical building (Jones, 2020). When a lead minister understands that his words will be heard in various settings, with a smorgasbord of challenges, he chooses his words even more carefully (*New International Version, 1978/2011, Colossians 4:16*). Illustrations matter and words become more important. A lead minister must remember to “make the most of every opportunity, for the days are evil” (*New International Version, 1978/2011, Ephesians 5:16*).

Cardo and Gallagher (2021) stated, “A preacher’s own virtue and integrity give his words credibility” (p. 64). A lead minister cannot equip a church if he is not spiritually qualified to lead, and if his qualifications do not develop by his own submission to Jesus. The apostle Peter reminded church leaders that in their pastoring, do not “lord it over those entrusted to you, but be examples to the flock” (*New International Version, 1978/2011, 1 Peter 5:3*).

Repentance and Sanctification

Inspiration and motivation surface when targeted goals are portrayed. Without expectations, results rarely follow. A lead minister should preach with strategic objectives and tangible goals in focus for the church. Smith (2019) described it in the following vein, “If God’s word demands a response, preachers should preach for a response” (p. 114). If the lead minister does not know what he expects from the sermon, how will the church know how to respond?

Proposed Interview Question 7: How would you define an inspirational message?

COC will respond to lead ministers differently. Every heart is strengthened, and every mind is deepened in unique ways. Inspiration is a relative phenomenon.

Some sermons are geared to encourage, while others are fashioned to teach or to instruct. Diversity is appropriate, as the word of God serves different purposes, however all sermons should be geared for repentance. “All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 3:16-17). On the Day of Pentecost, and when Peter explained to the crowd how to enter a healthy relationship with God, repentance was bound to Peter’s instructions. Peter said, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 2:38). According to the inspired apostle, the promises of forgiveness and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit were contingent upon repentance. If a lead minister does not preach repentance, he preaches a diluted gospel (Bredenhof, 2021).

Churches need to be reminded, challenged, inspired, and motivated, to continue the process of sanctification. As Paul exhorted the church at Rome:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 12:2).

Darling (2019) described the vision thus, “Biblical preaching aims to bring listeners into agreement with God’s Kingdom reality” (p. 20). A lead minister must implore his congregation

to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone of the church (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Ephesians 2:20). God's ways are different than man's ways, and God's thoughts are different than man's thoughts (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Isaiah 55:9). A lead minister stands under biblical authority, not over or next to it.

Preaching and Church Growth

It is imperative for COC to digest the dynamics which produce and sustain effective ministry, including, but not limited to, the efficiency and ability of lead ministers' communication, character, and connection with congregations. Nevertheless, the central focus of this study is to determine if the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers is connected to the growth of COC in Texas. Listening to the observations and insights of researched professionals who have traced preaching and church growth trends across all Christian denominations is apropos. What is true for one religious group will likely be true for COC.

The moral heartbeat of America has undoubtedly changed in numerous concerning ways. Originally a "Christian" nation built on Judeo-Christian principles, the United States has contemporarily chosen a different course of tragic proportions (Kyle, 2017). Without spiritual and scriptural discernment, many follow the path of a corrupt society (Raih, 2021). This unspiritual paradigm shift has consequently produced alarming inclinations for organized religion, patterned by significant decline in church attendance (Barna, 2016). For the overwhelming majority within their fellowship, COC have followed suit, as most COC have notably witnessed numerical decline for the last several decades (Yeakley, 2008).

How does the power of inspirational, biblical preaching influence the church growth conversation and challenge the catastrophic status quo of decline? Preaching is man's fuel to

move Christ's church forward (Kuruville, 2019). It is also a vehicle for the world to learn of the source and method of salvation (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 10:14).

Preaching must seek to awaken spiritual awareness and responsibility (Raih, 2021). From passionate preaching on the Day of Pentecost, the large crowd of Jews inquired of the apostle Peter and preacher of the hour, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 2:37). This same question should be asked at the present time if COC (or any church) is going to reclaim positive momentum in America. Like the Day of Pentecost, this question will be asked when strategic sermons are preached which seek inquisitive expectation from the audience gathered (Grandy, 2013).

Churches grow from a sense of urgency (Farr & Kotan, 2016). Urgency is created when preaching educates and reminds hearers of the tragic spiritual state for those who have not entered a covenant relationship with Christ. Preaching driven by evangelistic spirit funnels down through the life of the church (Harding, 1982). Churches respond to their leader's priorities and passions (Woolover & Bruce, 2012). If the lead minister is evangelistic, the church will develop evangelistic character and rhythms.

Proposed Interview Question 8: Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not?

When the world has more influence on the church than the church has on the world, the battle is already lost (Allison & Anderson, 2003). In similar fashion, when preaching attempts to accommodate or appease the world's desires, biblical communication suffers (Darling, 2019). Stephen (2015) observed, "We are not called to under-contextualize (becoming evasive) or to over-adapt (becoming accommodating). Instead, we are called to be a countercultural alternative society of God's people" (p.37). As lead ministers gear preaching toward an evangelistic

mission, COC will deepen their mission identity and evangelistic fervor, thus producing growing churches within their fellowship.

A loss of mission and evangelistic spirit is ultimately responsible for unfavorable church attendance trends in COC and many evangelical churches across America. Disobedience to Jesus's command to be salt and light is the root cause for the decline of the church in the western world (Allison & Anderson, 2003). The lead minister in COC is inherently connected to this dynamic. Missional preaching pours over into the lives of the church as they are empowered to seek and save the lost in their own circles (Bredenhof, 2021). An absence of evangelistic preaching leads to an absence of evangelism across the church.

In addition to mission, lead ministers must portray adamant reverence for the inspired, infallible text. Respect for Scripture is divinely connected to church growth (Alcántara, 2019).

This is not a new phenomenon. The writer of Hebrews taught:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Hebrews 4:12-13).

The writer of Hebrews explained to his readers that the word of God is the power for changing lives. Transformation does not stem from a lead minister's funny stories or unique illustrations. While these communication tools may be helpful in grabbing and holding the attention of an audience, transformation emanates from reverent proclamation of the inspired text (Piper, 2018).

In his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever (2013) argued that proper reverence for the word of God is foundational to the growth of the church: "It is not only the first

mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all of the others should follow” (p. 62). The word of God is the launch pad for progress. When God’s word is passionately preached, incredible things result (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 4:33). In a former, but similar book, Dever (2007) defined a healthy church as, “a congregation that increasingly reflects God’s character as his character has been revealed in his Word” (p. 13). Scripture is a manual for life and the blueprint for Christian witness. When the church puts the inspired teachings into practice, miraculous results ensue.

George Whitefield was considered an influential spiritual father and religious patriot at the birth of America, whose preaching and writing was respected and dispersed by churches across the original colonies and early states (Kidd, 2014). Upon hearing the famous evangelist preach, Nathan Cole, a young farmer in South Carolina provided the following remarks:

God was with him (Whitefield) everywhere. As he came along it solemnized my mind and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was clothed with authority from the great God; and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow. And my hearing him preach, *gave me a heart wound*; by God’s blessing: my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me (p. 131).

Preaching that strengthened the church in pre-colonial America is preaching that will build the church in a post Christian America—preaching that aims at the heart. Nathan Cole was so greatly impacted by the exposition of Whitefield that his life could not help but change. Since the beginning of mankind, human motivation has been driven by a convicted heart (Styles, 2019). To witness growth, lead ministers in COC must continually bring “heart wounds” to the pulpit with preaching that demands a God-honoring response and repentance (Smith, 2019).

Proposed Interview Question 9: When do you feel the most convicted by your lead minister?

Furthermore, it is important to note that church growth is uniquely connected to education from the pulpit. Thomas Rainer (2008) provided the following observations:

We also have a wealth of data to demonstrate the growing biblical ignorance among Christians in America. And we think we have made a good case to demonstrate that such illiteracy has been a major contributor to the high dropout rates of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds. Thus we encourage churches to *deepen* (p. 158).

Rainer offered uncommon (and unpopular) counsel among various church consultants who have suggested that to reach the masses and grow churches in a postmodern world, churches should subdue their religious teaching to better accommodate and capture seekers' ears (Rainer, 2003). Rainer, however, repeatedly argued in his writings and research that this strategy could not be further from the truth (Rainer, 2008). Diluting biblical proclamation dampens spiritual growth. Likewise, a biblically illiterate state is the epitomized danger Paul warned his protégé, Timothy, against when he instructed the young lead minister for the church in Ephesus:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 4:1-3).

A lack of biblical understanding creates an abundance of serious challenges, both physical and spiritual (Piper, 2018). Without foundational biblical knowledge, a person cannot identify how to please God (Proctor, 1992). It is the responsibility of the lead minister to effectively communicate biblical truths and expectations. Lead ministers who fail to prioritize educational preaching will likely serve spiritually and numerically declining COC.

Proposed Interview Question 10: How would you define an “educational message?”

Gap in the Literature

This research project is significant for all evangelical churches in America. Organized religion has long weathered a social storm. Since the end of World War II, Protestant churches across America have been in numerical decline (Doyle, 2003, p. 26). As the United States continues to digress from the Judeo-Christian values by which it was founded, organized religion will likely continue to absorb the blows from the surges of culture (Barna, 2016).

Previous numerical church growth studies by the Barna Group (2016) have analyzed missions, facilities, and outreach programs. Writers like Thomas Rainer (2003) have devoted scholarship to quantifying and understanding trends among the unchurched. Writers like Donald Miller (2012) have devoted writing and influence to understanding hurt and disdain toward the church by the unchurched. However, few have developed a focus for the effectiveness of the pulpit, and its connection to church growth.

In the book of Acts, the church grew numerically and spiritually by powerful preaching. Peter and John were not ashamed to speak of Christ, even if it meant their imprisonment (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 4:20). After the death of Stephen, the brave martyr who refused to relinquish his faith in the face of suffering, the church scattered as persecution intensified in Jerusalem. The text reminds the reader, “Those who had been scattered *preached*

the word wherever they went” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 8:4). As refugees were seeking a new beginning in a new place, they preached the word as they traveled. It was God’s plan for the church to grow through the preaching and public proclamation of his word (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 10:17). With a Kingdom emphasis on preaching, effective preaching should be strategically positioned in the church growth conversation (Darling, 2019). Unfortunately, there is a noticeable void of discussion for one of God’s preeminent communication tools and the church’s effective outreach engines for church growth: preaching the gospel.

There is also a conspicuous gap in connecting effective preaching with healthy leadership practices (Harrison, 2018). Effective preaching is not confined to the message, but also connected to a godly messenger (Keck, 2014). Who preaches is just as important as what is preached. If preaching is going to advance church growth, healthy, spiritual leadership must be included in the dialogue (Grandy, 2013).

This research project is even more pertinent for COC. In recent years, COC have known nothing but decline (Yeakley, 2008). Even more so, COC have been one of the fastest dwindling religious groups in America (Barna, 2016). A few large COC in Texas have witnessed growth in the last few years, but these COC are the exception, not the norm (Yeakley).

When COC discuss their decline, explanations are often limited to doctrinal differences, outdated outreach methods, a complementarian versus egalitarian view of women’s leadership roles, and traditional versus contemporary worship styles (Casey, 2004), but there must be more to the equation. This author, who has served as a lead minister in COC for over a decade, seeks to understand how church leadership affects church growth trends, and if powerful preaching and

intentional pastoring reverse the decline. Historically, the role of lead ministers in COC and their connection to church attrition has not been seriously evaluated.

Related Literature and Rationale Conclusion

The lead minister is not employed only by an earthly organization, nor should he labor from secular motivation. He has received a spiritual job description which is evaluated by divine standards. Vines and Shaddix (2017) observed, “The preacher speaks the Word of God in the words of men; therefore, preaching is the most important kind of public speaking” (p. 224). Preaching the gospel is not simply making a speech and serving the church is not solely being a good neighbor (Piper, 2018). Paul encouraged the young preacher Timothy to, “guard what has been entrusted to you care” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 6:20). Likewise, lead ministers must guard and honor their position and calling, striving to continually be molded into the likeness of Christ. Without this motivation and purpose kept in full view, it will be very difficult for a lead minister to feel fulfilled in his calling or for God to be glorified in his ministry.

Chapter Summary

Christ’s church is too priceless of a gift to watch decline. Its future existence is guaranteed (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 16:18), as nothing can remove the church without removing Jesus. As the bride of Christ (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Revelation 21: 2), the church will always be defended, strengthened, and encouraged by her groom, but divine protection does not ensure human success. Without strong leadership, both from a lead minister’s preaching and pastoring, COC will likely grapple to regain footing and grow. Furthermore, churches of all denominations and affiliations will struggle to soar without the same leadership gifts and disciplines.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a research outline which details the procedures and parameters of this study. Additionally, a rationalization for why a qualitative phenomenological approach suited the researcher's goals to diagnose a possible connection of church growth to the preaching and personality of lead ministers within COC. This chapter states the research problem, research questions, and an explanatory design and methodology for the study.

Research Design Synopsis

The study consisted of five numerically growing COC in Texas, substantiated by church attendance records, with a minimum weekly attendance of 250 members, who have been in existence for at least twenty years. Furthermore, the study included the perceptions and the lived experiences of "devoted" and "new" members in each COC in the study.

The researcher strategically chose the following COC in Texas to participate in the study:

Brown Street COC; Waxahachie, Texas

Lewisville COC; Lewisville, Texas

McDermott Road COC; Plano, Texas

Memorial COC; Houston, Texas

Shawnee Trail COC; Frisco, Texas

Despite declining church attendance across America (Barna, 2016), these five COC have witnessed numerical growth in membership and attendance the last several years. This researcher rejoiced in the numerical growth of these COC, but also yearned to explore why these COC were blessed with numerical growth when other COC of similar sizes and histories declined or struggled to maintain their current size. Except for Memorial COC, all the churches in the study reside in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. All churches in the study are in urban locales.

The researcher collected information by one-on-one interviews, conducted through video conferencing software, which provided opportunities for participants to respond to the research questions (RQs) of the study. Qualitative research seeks to understand the “lived experiences” or “perceptions” of the individuals being interviewed. Specific verbiage of qualitative research purpose statements is noticeably central to this vision (Creswell, 2017, p. 118). Leedy and Ormrod (2019) observed, “Qualitative researchers make considerable use of inductive reasoning: They make many specific observations and then draw inferences about larger and more general phenomena” (p. 82). Combing through lengthy conversations and interviews may prove more difficult and time consuming, but it produces reliable and revealing results.

After the researcher interviewed the sample populations, respondent stories and lived experiences were collected, documented, and organized, in hopes of understanding why members choose churches. The variety of lived experiences helped the researcher discern if people most often enter or remain in churches based on preaching, pastoring, or programs of the church. However, five different churches participated in the study to provide a diverse gamut of lived experiences and perceptions of “devoted” and “new” members within growing, established, midsize COC in Texas.

Research Problem

Organized religion has faced significant challenges for the last several decades. As postmodern culture and post-Christian thinking has continued to cultivate, passionate commitment and faithful attendance to local churches has steadily dwindled. Church attendance has not grown in America for the past several decades (Barna, 2016, p. 52), and the decline was only accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pluss, 2020, p. 287). A virus of physical and spiritual proportions was not predicted or expected by church leaders, researchers, and

statisticians. Consequently, churches are now faced with two significant struggles: how to reverse decades of decline, and unfortunately, how to recover from COVID-19's lingering and sizeable depletion of church attendance and charitable giving. Churches have commonly declared a 1/3 loss of membership since the beginning of COVID-19, unlikely to return (Plüss, 2020).

COC, a nondenominational religious group born from the Restoration Movement, are not immune to this national, spiritual crisis, having experienced substantial decay within their fellowship for decades (Yeakley, 2008, p. 31). To the surprise of this researcher (who has also served as a lead minister in COC), a specific concern has not been historically considered, producing a momentous gap. How much can, or should, the downward cycle of COC be attributed to the weekly voice in the pulpit? Do COC grow (or decline) based on the lead minister? Are dynamic voices and passionate lives influential factors in repealing the trend? Can stale voices and apathetic pastors prolong the decline? These questions must be answered if COC are going to enjoy a promising future. Trends of church growth cannot, and should not, solely rest on the shoulders of lead ministers, but the study seeks to measure a potential connection of the lead minister with the process.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established COC in Texas. *Church growth trend* was generally defined as a numerical increase in membership and weekly attendance, substantiated by church attendance records. The researcher predominantly listened to the stories and lived experiences of “devoted” and “new” members of COC in the study. For a theoretical foundation, the theory guiding this

qualitative study was the Contingency Leadership Theory defined by Fred E. Fiedler, specifically in a leader's adoption of, rather than adaptation to, church growth.

Research Questions

RQ 1: In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the preaching of the lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

RQ 2: In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the pastoring of the lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

RQ 3: In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the preaching of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

RQ 4: In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the pastoring of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

RQ 5: When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister's preaching, versus other factors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

RQ 6: When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister's pastoring, versus other factors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

Research Design and Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative research format, coupled by a phenomenological study, due to its intentional focus on the perceptions and perspectives of people. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) provided the following snapshot of the phenomenological lens, “A phenomenological study tries to answer the question ‘*What is it like to experience such-and-such?*’” (p. 255). For the researcher's study, a phenomenological approach was the most suitable.

Phenomenological researchers depend almost exclusively on lengthy interviews with a small, carefully selected sample of participants (Leedy & Ormord, 2019, p. 255). The sample of this study was members in five COC in Texas, with at least 250 members in weekly attendance, that have been in existence for a minimum of twenty years and have experienced a numerical increase in membership and weekly attendance. The delimitations of this sample complemented

the parameters of a typical phenomenological study. Interviews were conducted that sought to listen to, and ultimately understand, the hearts of those being interviewed.

Setting and Participants

The study involved “devoted” and “new” members of five numerically growing COC in Texas. The study was conducted solely within COC, a nondenominational, autonomous religious group born out of the Restoration Movement in America. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher was intentional about developing trust and camaraderie with those being researched, and one-on-one interviews were mandatory for this purpose, even though administered through video conferencing software.

Participants received the interview questions before the interviews occurred in hopes to diminish concern or confusion on what would be asked, and why, and so those being interviewed received ample time to consider responses and prepare explanations for their experiences. These efforts were made to maintain the integrity of the research process, without data being coerced or manipulated.

The researcher selected churches consistent with the guidelines of this study, as previously stated: five COC in Texas with at least 250 members in weekly attendance, that have been in existence for a minimum of twenty-years. These five churches had experienced numerical growth in the last several years, as substantiated by church attendance records. These churches were selected by internet searches, networking among lead ministers, and the Church of Christ National Database with 21st Century Christian.

Once qualified COC were identified, the researcher contacted the lead minister of these churches for permission to activate this study within their congregations. Upon approval, the researcher contacted “devoted” and “new members” within these churches, who would be

potentially willing to participate in the study. While contacting these members, the researcher further explained the process, secured their participation, sent the interview questions, and scheduled times for interviews.

Role of the Researcher

Phenomenological research thrives when the researcher has personal experience with the phenomenon in question, and furthermore, when he wants to gain a better understanding of the experience of others (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 255). This author has spent over a decade as a lead minister within Churches of Christ. He wanted to comprehend why attritional transition occurs, not only for COC and the lead ministers who serve them, but especially in how his own preaching and pastoring can influence church growth or decline. Choosing a church is a deeply personal decision. Phenomenological research naturally approaches individualized patterns and perceptions.

Phenomenological research seeks to understand the experiences from the participants' point of view (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 258). Additionally, phenomenological research is guided by in-depth interviews with purposeful sampling, usually between five to twenty-five individuals (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 258). The study will abide by these guidelines.

Since qualitative research is prone to greater degrees of bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019), the researcher will be careful to note potential bias of the project, including, but not limited to, bias from the researcher, those being researched, and the responses documented from the research. Church attrition can rest on subjective feedback. Therefore, the researcher will be disciplined in asking interview questions, and the recording of lived experiences, to seek objective outcomes.

Instrumentation bias, as defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2019), exists when “participants are encouraged to reflect on and talk about some topics rather than other ones. The outcome is that some variables are included in a study, and other potentially important variables are overlooked” (p. 169). The study’s research questions specifically inquired of the preaching and pastoral effectiveness of lead ministers, and how these factors affected choosing a COC. Interview questions addressed additional reasons why members, “devoted” or “new” as defined by the research project, might choose a COC, including, but not limited to: Bible class programs, visitation ministries, small group programs, other church staff, and outreach efforts of the church. These potential supplementary components were carefully analyzed when considering trends of growth and/or decline within COC.

Since the researcher spent many years serving as a lead minister within Churches of Christ, his own presuppositions concerning a lead minister’s effectiveness, persuasion, and/or influence, could have resulted in his asking of leading questions or documenting tainted discoveries. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) penned, “Do not overlook the potential effects of a researcher’s expectations, values, and general belief systems, which can predispose the researcher to study certain variables and not other variables, as well as to draw certain conclusions and not other conclusions” (p. 170). The researcher avoided the temptation of ignoring feedback that he may have found offensive, ambiguous, or inaccurate to his profession. The researcher worked to provide trust, confidence, and freedom for respondents to express their lived experiences and perceptions, without judgment or repercussion from transparency. The researcher employed honesty and integrity during the initial conversations, interviews, and collecting of stories and experiences. To accomplish these goals, interviews were conducted based on the following foundational assumptions:

- 1) Five COC in Texas selected for the study could provide the substantial feedback needed to produce tangible conclusions.
- 2) “Devoted” members were able and willing to provide feedback concerning their perception of the lead minister’s influence.
- 3) “New” members were able and willing to provide feedback concerning why chose their current COC.
- 4) Five COC in Texas selected for the study could locate accurate church records of appropriate proportion to substantiate a trajectory of numerical growth.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher was committed to following ethical practices throughout the duration of the study. To alleviate risks of unethical protocols, the researcher utilized several initiatives. The researcher contacted the lead minister of the churches, requesting permission for his members to engage in the study. The researcher hoped to build trust and reduce suspicion for the project. Therefore, potential lead ministers were provided the interview questions and an outline of the interview process in advance. Informed consent was sought from all participants with participants completing a consent document as required by the IRB.

After receiving approval from the lead ministers of participating churches within the study, the researcher met with members through video conferencing software to explain the purpose of the project. The researcher sought to assuage the lead minister that the project was not designed to diminish his effectiveness or to question the nature or security of his employment.

The researcher was committed to maintaining the confidentiality of participants and protecting the privacy of participants will be paramount. Roberts (2010) observed, the purpose of the IRB is “the protection of those participating in a research study, particularly around ethical issues such as informed consent, protection from harm, and confidentiality” (p. 32). Participants’ names were disclosed. Responses are public for the purposes of the study, but the identification

of the participants has remained anonymous. Confidentiality was strengthened through informed consent forms detailing the process and the publication of responses.

The researcher did not want church members to feel forced into the study, and the researcher did not want lead ministers to feel threatened by the responses or participation of the members. Therefore, the researcher provided the opportunity for all participants to withdraw from the study during the interviews, after the interviews, and even during the assimilation of stories and lived experiences. Member checking was used by the researcher to afford participants the opportunity to validate the transcripts of the interviews.

Finally, the study was submitted to the Liberty University (LU) Internal Review Board (IRB). After completing a successful prospectus hearing, the researcher applied for review and approval by the LU's IRB, helping the researcher become knowledgeable of ethical standards and procedures for review. Once IRB and Dissertation Supervisor approval were obtained, the researcher began conducting the study and gathering data.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

The study focused on numerical attendance church growth trends and its connection to the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within established COC in Texas. To accommodate this task, the researcher utilized open-ended questions through one-on-one interviews to track and record data results. The researcher desired for respondents to experience a safe space in answering interview questions through nonrestrictive, nonjudgmental methods.

Collection Methods

The researcher submitted a data collection plan for approval by the LU IRB. Upon approval of this plan, the researcher collected data through one-on-one interviews, administered through video conferencing software, to build rapport and trust with those being interviewed.

Phone interviews or electronic surveys seemed cold and impersonal, and possibly irrelevant. With the subject matter of choosing and leaving COC, and how those decisions might be tied to the influence of lead ministers, data collected individualized contacts.

Similarly, interviews observed a semi-structured format. While it is important for the researcher to honor the delimitations of the study, the researcher wanted respondents to openly express concerns and observations. This also helped develop an understanding of the origination and patterns of respondents' feelings toward lead ministers in COC.

Instruments and Protocols

Choosing a church can be a guarded, subjective decision, often stemming from transitions, experiences, and life changing decisions. These factors naturally complement qualitative inquiry. With data surfacing from an individualized periscope, protecting the privacy of respondents was the researcher's top concern.

While participants' feedback and answers are public for the purposes of the study, the respondents' identity has remained privileged using pseudonyms. Relaxing the rigor of this requirement would have likely decreased participation, and thus, the effectiveness and reliability of the study. Protecting confidentiality carried supreme importance for this researcher.

The researcher sought to establish additional notable themes through interviews and lived experiences of respondents. These themes arose from transcribed interview content but were evidenced by specific words, emotions, or stories which recalled the positive or negative feelings toward lead ministers in COC. With the goals of identifying patterns, and tracing habitually lived experiences, the number of participants in this study remained limited. As such, one-on-one conversations, administered through video conferencing software, helped ensure camaraderie.

Interviews

The study utilized open-ended interview questions to help obtain the participants' lived experiences with lead ministers in COC. Creswell and Creswell (2017) argued that within qualitative research, "unstructured and open-ended questions that are few in number elicit views and opinions from participants" (p. 187) in highly effective ways. For the purposes of this study, open-ended questions were most suitable.

All interviews were pre-scheduled and conducted through video conferencing software to capture verbatim responses and strengthen the reliability of the research. (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 267). The transcripts were analyzed through Fathom after being recorded through video conferencing software.

Within the churches selected for the study, "devoted" and "new" members were interviewed. The purpose in interviewing these parties was to gather various lived experiences from members who contrast in experiences and tenures.

This researcher initiated contact with potential churches for the study via internet searches, networking among lead ministers, Twenty-First Century Christian's online database for COC, and recommendations from lead ministers of COC of similar size and history outside of the targeted sample populations of the study. Specifically, the researcher selected COC to participate who resided in Dallas, Texas. For the consistency of the study and data collected therein, the researcher selected COC in the metroplex to evaluate if numerical growth patterns and experiences were similar. Additionally, he wanted to learn if members' perceptions and lived experiences in each of these congregations were consistent with other metroplex COC families. Apart from Memorial Church of Christ in Houston, all participating churches reside in the DFW Metroplex. However, like the other participating COC in the study, Memorial Church of Christ is an urban church composed of suburban families. Memorial Church of Christ was chosen by the

researcher as a participating COC when the researcher exhausted growing Dallas/Ft. Worth COC who met the criteria for this study of being in existence for at least twenty years with at least 250 people in weekly attendance. Even with four COC in the Dallas area and one COC in the Houston area, each COC in the study operated from similar socio-economic and geographical demographics. All the COC in the study have witnessed a trajectory of numerical growth in membership and weekly attendance for the last several years.

Once these churches were selected, the researcher initially contacted the lead ministers of the congregations by phone to secure their willingness and ability to participate. Upon receiving approval, the researcher then contacted “devoted” and “new” members provided for the study. If a congregation did not provide lead minister and member participation, they did not participate in the study.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. To accommodate the length of interviews, while still allowing respondents the freedom to openly express their perceptions and lived experiences, six to seven interview questions were asked (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 264) that addressed the greater research problem of the study. Interviews began and end with a prayer for God’s guidance and wisdom, and the furthering of his Kingdom.

Observations

The researcher is employed by a COC in Dallas, Texas that also meets the criteria of this study (mid-sized, established, and numerically growing). Within the researcher’s congregation were retired Ph.D. professors and administrators. If needed, the researcher was mentored by them to ensure that the process was not skewed, tainted, or inaccurate.

Data was collected and transcribed for review. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for actuality. Open-ended questions served as the foundation of gathering data.

Procedures

The researcher was the only individual collecting data through scheduled interviews, which were administered and recorded through video conferencing software. The interviews were then transcribed through Fathom. Recordings were saved on the researcher's computer and backed up through iCloud and OneDrive software. The participants' lived experiences were categorized by repeated themes and observations of the influence of lead ministers that resulted in choosing or remaining in a COC. The one-on-one interviews were well managed and planned.

These protocols were vital to protecting the integrity of the study and the participants. A study of this nature is delicate and complex. Therefore, honoring a fixed system was necessary for protecting the mental and emotional health of participants.

Based on the literature review of chapter two, the following potential interview questions for "devoted" and "new" members were identified.

- 1) What is it like to sit and listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012) 48
- 2) How would you describe your lead minister's preaching? (Darling, 2019) 54
- 3) What keeps you connected to a lead minister? (Harrington & Lewis, 2017)
- 4) When do you feel the most shepherded by your lead minister? (Darling, 2019)
- 5) How would you define a "scriptural message?" (Merida, 2009)
- 6) How would you define the word "pastoral"? (Carter, 2005; Cox, 2012)
- 7) How would you define an "inspirational message?" (Smith, 2019)
- 8) Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)
- 9) When do you feel the most convicted by your lead minister? (Smith, 2019)
- 10) How would you define an "educational message?" (Proctor, 1992)

To streamline the interview process, this author elected to choose the following interview questions, some of which combine two or more of the proposed questions listed above:

- 1) What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)
- 2) How would you define an “inspirational message?” (Cueva, 2020)
- 3) How would you define an “educational message?” (Newton, 2020)
- 4) How would you define a “scriptural message?” (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)
- 5) How would you define the word “pastoral”? (Bredenhof, 2021)
- 6) What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996, Smith, 2019)
- 7) Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study was conducted in several phases including documentation and the categorizing of responses. The usage of specific words and the recall of certain events or experiences were also informative. Establishing a concise, clear pattern of data analysis was vital to avoid confusing or misleading research.

Analysis Method

The researcher turned his ear to emergent themes and patterns throughout the interviews. This process leaned heavily on inductive reasoning, as the researcher observed a few specific situations or events and then impose targeted meanings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 344). Driven by inductive discipline, the researcher transitioned among data collection and data interpretation throughout the process to better discern trends that emerged in interviews (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 344). Creswell and Creswell (2017) defined the process as, “working back and forth

between the themes until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes” (p. 181). The researcher did not hasten to draw preconceived conclusions, but he allowed adequate time to embrace the process and the responses.

To legitimize the integrity of discovery, data was collected in various forms. For the purposes of the study, interviews were transcribed from audio recordings. After the interviews were transcribed through Fathom, transcriptions were entered into a word document, and respondents’ feedback was traced for notable and repeatable themes.

Trustworthiness

If data fails to be collected, documented, and analyzed in a trustworthy fashion, it is not worthy of preservation. Without validity, qualitative research struggles to hold relevance. The researcher was committed to maintaining the integrity of this study from beginning to end. It was the researcher’s hope that this study will help COC evaluate the effectiveness and influence of lead ministers. It might shape the training of lead ministers, hiring and firing practices of lead ministers, and the implementation of lead minister’s spiritual gifts and authority.

The researcher was transparent with those being interviewed about the process before it began, even before those being interviewed agreed to participate. He sent interview questions in advance for consideration and preparation. He explained how identity would be protected. Additionally, he confirmed his plans for the data’s usage and storage to avoid any misrepresentation of their participation or his objectives.

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility seeks to understand how connected research findings are to reality (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 26). Beyond academic spaces, Christian discipleship rests

on integrity. This researcher diligently sought to employ such virtues through the credibility of his research.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher used reflexive self-analysis. Specifically, he employed daily jottings of his research logs (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27). This helped ensure the credibility of real time research and discoveries.

According to Stahl and King (2020), time in the profession is an important factor in weighing trustworthiness and credibility (p. 27). The researcher has served as a lead minister in COC in Texas for over a decade. His experiences aided his understanding of respondents' feedback, thus strengthening his recording and tracking of discoveries, and ultimately, the credibility of the project.

Dependability

The researcher acknowledges the necessity for dependability in research, which has been defined as the "trust" in "trustworthy" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 27). To that end, the researcher selected a colleague to review his research. The purpose of this peer review was to ensure that the researcher has appropriately separated discoveries between fact and interpretation, a process often defined as "bracketing", to diminish, and ultimately, deplete, any trails of bias or manipulation of research discovery. It also strengthened the consistency of the research.

With a peer review, the researcher still protects the confidentiality of the respondents. Data was secured on the researcher's personal computer and password protected. When printed, the data will be locked in a filing cabinet when not in use.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, confirmability has been defined as "getting as close to objective reality as the qualitative researcher can get" (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 28). Pursuing objectivity

over subjectivity is challenging, especially when the researcher is closely connected with the phenomenon being studied. Nevertheless, this researcher unwaveringly pursued objectivity.

It is recommended that qualitative researchers employ “rigorous subjectivity” by taking deliberate steps to ensure that analyses and interpretations will be credible and defensible in the eyes of well-informed individuals (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019, p. 356). The researcher asked respondents to answer questions with what they believe to be true, what they wish were true, or even what the researcher might not want to hear (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 356). While seeking to document objective responses, the researcher employed an audit trail in attempts to establish openness of respondents, as well as to confirm that the interpretations are derived from data gathered and conclusions reached from the study.

Transferability

Transferability considers the reliability of research, and the potential of research being conveyed to or implemented in other settings. The researcher hopes this study will be used by churches within the Southern Baptist Convention and Community Bible Churches of similar size and established histories, as they deliberate the effectiveness of their own church leadership models and practices. The researcher desires all churches to seriously consider the impact, influence, and consequences of lead teachers, ministers, and pastors, especially concerning numerical growth in church attendance and membership.

For this to become a tangible reality, the researcher observed disciplined research ethics and standards. He provided descriptions of how participants were selected. Ideally, this study will benefit other COC, specifically in how and why COC hire, fire, or retain their lead ministers.

This topic needs to be addressed for the benefit of the Kingdom of God. There are many reasons why churches struggle to grow. Lead ministers should not be active culprits of the

problem. Serving as a lead minister in COC can be an isolating task, but this study will help lead ministers remember the power of their influence, as the apostle Paul exhorted the young preacher Timothy, “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4: 15-16).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers with five mid-sized, established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. *Church growth trend* was defined as a numerical increase in membership and weekly attendance, substantiated by church attendance records.

The researcher was the only individual collecting data through scheduled interviews, administered one-on-one through video conferencing software. This study was grounded in open-ended interview questions to help obtain the participants (“devoted” and “new” members) lived’ experiences with lead ministers in COC.

In conclusion, the researcher was committed to maintaining the confidentiality and privacy of participants. Data was transcribed in a disciplined manner. The researcher sought to better understand how choosing and remaining in churches might be connected to lead ministers in COC.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers with five mid-sized, established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. The study sought to understand the degree of influence the lead ministers have on the COC they serve, evidenced by numerical growth in attendance and membership, substantiated by church attendance records. Based on the findings, it helps churches and church leaderships understand the magnitude of the importance of who they employ as lead ministers, and why.

This chapter focuses on the lived experiences and stories from interviews of members from five established COC within Texas who have at least 250 people in weekly attendance. In total, twenty-seven interviews were completed through video conferencing software. This chapter will detail the research process as it was conducted. The compilation protocol and demographic data will also be included as well as the process of protecting identities of participants.

This study interviewed twenty-seven adults who attended the five established COC in Texas with at least 250 people in weekly attendance. The twenty-seven research participants represented a mix of “devoted” members (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” members (placing membership in the last year). The churches in the study reside in suburbs of Dallas and Houston. All participants in the study are active in the COC they attend.

The lead ministers of the five COC in the study were contacted by the researcher to secure their willingness for their church’s participation (Appendix C). The researcher did not interview members in COC without the lead minister’s blessing since his influence and ministry

would be the main topic of conversation in the interviews. Upon receiving his confirmation of approval for the study, lead ministers sent the names and contact information to the researcher of the “devoted” and “new” members in his COC to be interviewed.

The researcher then contacted the “devoted” and “new” members provided by the lead ministers of the five COC within the study to seek their verbal confirmation to participate in the research study (Appendix F). If interested, potential participants were emailed a consent form by the researcher to provide them more details pertaining their study and to secure their participation (Appendix B), which they signed, scanned, and returned to the researcher prior to the interviews. This consent form also served as a screening tool for participants as they verified their age and membership with the COC.

Once participants agreed, consented, and were verified successfully to participate in the study, the researcher organized online Zoom interviews. These open-ended interviews lasted one hour and were video and audio recorded. The interviews were then transcribed through an online service called Fathom. Participants were allowed to “member check” their answers through these transcriptions at the conclusion of the interview.

Once all twenty-seven interviews were completed, the researcher began the data analysis process. The researcher hand traced recurring themes and repeated words that described the preaching and pastoring of the lead minister. Since the participants were all members of numerically growing COC within Texas, of similar size and history, repeated feedback from participants was naturally defined. Names of participants were replaced with pseudonyms to protect participants’ identity and to obstruct personal information from unnecessary disclosure. This additional layer of anonymity was as much for the participants’ sake as for the lead

minister. If negative comments were made about the lead minister or his congregation, the researcher did not want the lead minister to be superfluously discouraged by the data.

To assemble the data from the interviews, each transcript was read carefully numerous times by the researcher. This process helped the researcher analyze themes for growing and memberships in COC. The importance of the lead minister being both teacher and servant was evident throughout the interviews. Additionally, an emotional and spiritual connection to the lead minister from church members, both “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” carried superlative importance. Research compilation and analysis processes are further expanded in the following paragraphs.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

After eligible participants were confirmed, Zoom audio and video interviews were organized to collect data. Twenty-seven different interviews from five different COC within Texas were conducted. The researcher used Fathom software to record the video and audio of the interviews, which were immediately transcribed and available for review. This recording feature proved helpful as it captured the conversation verbatim with immediate availability for review and assessment. It also highlighted portions of the transcripts deemed “important” by the researcher, with supplying time stamps for the excerpts in the video.

The recording was a smooth process. If the researcher struggled to understand the response of a participant, either from technological hindrance or communication barrier, he would ask the participant to repeat the statement or rephrase their answer. This allowed for precise collection of data and the integral representation of intent. When appropriate, the researcher asked the participant to rephrase or illustrate their answer.

The researcher followed the Semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix H). When appropriate, he would ask follow-up questions or elucidation inquiries. He encouraged participants to expound on their initial answers when necessary. This opportunity was frequently accepted by the participants as their perceptions and lived experiences were described in greater detail, moving beyond the immediate focus of the interview questions. The researcher would also ask additional questions, not necessarily included in the formal list of interview inquiries, to gain a deeper understanding. In addition to providing flexibility for the participants to be at ease and speak openly, this semi-structured approach strengthened camaraderie between the researcher and the participants in the study. It also helped the researcher understand the stories and circumstances behind the participants' answers.

Following the collection of the audio and video data, interviews were saved and stored on the researcher's personal, password-protected computer. The files were uploaded to memory storage in Fathom, software which the researcher also utilized to transcribe the interviews so that he could accurately review and trace themes from the interviews after they had concluded. Participants' pseudonyms, coupled with the actual name of their COC, were the labels assigned to the interview conversations in the Fathom software and files on the researcher's computer. Each transcript was thoroughly reviewed five times by the researcher to trace emerging themes and descriptive words. After five thorough reviews of interview transcripts, participant's responses had reached saturation and had been summarized efficiently. During the interviews, the researcher would make handwritten notes about the process and the participants' reactions to questions and explanations for their responses.

The researcher took very seriously his responsibility to accurately report data. To correctly interpret the participants' answers, the researcher replayed the audio recording in

reviewing the transcripts. This process was imperative when quoting word-by-word quotations and inserting them into the research study's conclusions. This routine significantly aided the process of reviewing the transcript and accurately reporting and representing participants' responses.

This researcher estimates that Fathom is 95% accurate in its transcription of interviews and the attachment of words to appropriate speakers. As the researcher encountered inaccuracies, typos, and misinterpretations of words, he corrected the errors and noted accordingly. This diligence to careful revision improved the initial 95% threshold of Fathom's approximate accuracy. All typos were corrected and replaced before entering this dissertation.

After the interview audio and video files were uploaded into the Fathom transcription software, the process of establishing themes and protecting the identity of participants began. With participants all attending COC of similar histories and size in Texas, responses were strikingly similar. Pseudonyms were strictly employed to protect the personal identities and names of participants. Pseudonyms were not used, however, for the names of churches in the study. The lead ministers of these churches had already agreed to have the study conducted in their respective congregations, and disclosing the names of the COC would be helpful for other COC who evaluated the study. The COC in the study are prominent churches in Texas within the COC fellowship. Data reflections were attached to specific interview questions, and each interview question, except for the last one, had a corresponding research question.

Demographic and Sample Data

Lead ministers were contacted by the researcher for their blessing and willingness to participate in the study in their respective COC. Over thirty-five emails (Appendix E) detailing the nature and specifics of the study were sent to potential participants from each COC whose

names and email addresses had been supplied by the lead minister of each COC. To establish a similar research sample, lead ministers were asked by the researcher to supply the names of four to six families, evenly dispersed of “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” (placing membership within the last year) members. Fortunately, the lead ministers of the five COC in the study all supplied families to be interviewed. This achieved needed research outcomes for the researcher and the research study. In contacting participants and sending out email correspondence and consent forms with the “devoted” and “new” members of each COC, the researcher used the approved IRB forms to communicate with participants directly (Appendix E). It was determined by the researcher and his supervisor that saturation in the study was reached after twenty-seven interviews.

The researcher’s use of consent forms (Appendix B) and interview questions (Appendix G) helped the researcher compartmentalize important documentation in one place. By initially contacting the lead minister for his permission to activate the study in his COC, and by requesting from the lead minister names and contact information of these families, evenly composed of “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” (placing membership within the last year) members, initial screening measures were observed. By the researcher then contacting these families through email to secure their participation and plan Zoom interviews, additional layers of screening were engrained into the process.

Participants were contacted directly by the researcher through a recruitment email (Appendix E). The mail secured their participation, explained the process, and requested their reply with a suitable time for their participation. In follow up emails, consent forms (Appendix B) were sent by the researcher for participants to sign, scan, and send back to the researcher prior to the interview.

Once an interview time was set, the researcher sent the participants a Zoom link and the interview questions (Appendix G) that would be asked at the interview so that they could prepare their thoughts accordingly. The consent form (Appendix B) detailed information concerning the purpose of the study, criteria for the study, eligibility of participants, interview length and protocol, benefits and risk of the study, and pertinent information concerning confidentiality. Participants were assured through initial email correspondence, consent forms, and verbal affirmation that their participation was strictly voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The research population consisted of twenty-seven individuals from five different COC in Texas with at least 250 people in weekly attendance who had been in existence for at least twenty years. Each COC was represented by “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” (placing membership within the last year) members. Even if couples were interviewed, each participant was individually asked interview questions. Consequently, individualized responses were recorded by the researcher accordingly. For some couples interviewed, the responses of husbands and wives differed significantly.

Table 1: Church Profile

The following COC participated in this research study. Their locations, membership size, average weekly attendance, and years of existence are included therein. Except for the Memorial Church of Christ, the COC studied reside in the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metroplex. As the chart details, the churches have similar church membership size and weekly attendance. Membership is defined by baptized individuals who can be located through church database records and who claim connection to the COC, while attendance is measured by the number of individuals on campus of the COC for worship services. All five of these COC have experienced numerical

growth in church attendance and membership the last several years, substantiated by church records.

Church Name	Location	Membership	Average Weekly Attendance	Years in Existence
Brown Street Church of Christ	Waxahachie, Texas	850	700	50 years
Lewisville Church of Christ	Lewisville, Texas	750	550	26 years
McDermott Road Church of Christ	Plano, Texas	1000	800	24 years
Memorial Church of Christ	Houston, Texas	1000	800	65 years
Shawnee Trail Church of Christ	Frisco, Texas	600	500	23 years

Table 2: Research Participant Profile

The following participants were interviewed by this researcher for this study. Personal identities have been protected by pseudonyms. As detailed by the table, ages, genders, devoted and new members were evenly distributed throughout the population.

Name	Gender	Age	Devoted/New Member
Alex	Male	30s	Devoted
Bill	Male	50s	New
Bob	Male	30s	Devoted
Caleb	Male	40s	Devoted
Carl	Male	50s	Devoted
Carol	Female	60s	New

Cassandra	Female	50s	Devoted
Claire	Female	50s	New
Cynthia	Female	20s	New
Frank	Male	50s	Devoted
Hayley	Female	30s	Devoted
James	Male	60s	New
Jason	Male	50s	Devoted
Joe	Male	30s	Devoted
John	Male	80s	Devoted
Lisa	Female	50s	Devoted
Lucas	Male	50s	New
Lydia	Female	50s	Devoted
Michael	Male	50s	New
Paul	Male	50s	Devoted
Peter	Male	30s	New
Sarah	Female	50s	Devoted
Sue	Female	30s	Devoted
Susan	Female	30s	New
Terry	Male	30s	New
Thomas	Male	50s	Devoted
Tim	Male	60s	New

Data Analysis and Findings

The data analysis of the interviews produced twenty-seven pieces of data. These twenty-seven pieces of data were protected by twenty-seven pseudonyms. After a thorough review of the

lived experiences and perceptions released by the participants, constant themes emerged such as: *educational, applicable, example, available, biblical, inspirational, humble, servant, impartial, challenging, dynamic, intentional, and comforting*. These themes helped describe the overall phenomena that was studied: the connection of church growth and the pulpit.

All data was carefully collected through the interview protocol. The semi-structured interview guide established helpful guiderails for the collection of pertinent information (Appendix H). Interviews began with cordial conversations and introductions, asking participants to confirm their designation of being either a “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) or a “new” (placing membership within the last year) member. If husbands and wives were both participating in the interview, two consent forms were signed, scanned, and sent back to the researcher prior to the interviews. The researcher assured the participants that their feedback would remain anonymous, and their identity protected. Responses to these initial introductory questions were transcribed in the Fathom software, and after the general introduction, the following interview questions were asked of and answered by every participant:

1. What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)
2. How would you define an “inspirational message?” (Cueva, 2020)
3. How would you define an “educational message?” (Newton, 2020)
4. How would you define a “scriptural message?” (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)
5. How would you define the word “pastoral”?. (Bredenhof, 2021)
6. What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996; Smith, 2019)
7. Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)

The responses to these questions were recorded in the Fathom software. Consistent themes and repeated answers were documented and categorized after thorough reviews of the recorded transcripts, interview summaries from the AI software, and the researcher’s handwritten notes from the interview conversations.

Research Question 1

In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the preaching of their lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

This open-ended research question sought to understand how prominent of a role the pulpit plays in the lives of believers. In the interview process, it became abundantly clear to the researcher that church members hold their lead minister in high regard or negative opinion. Zero participants were neutral in their providing feedback from their lead minister at their COC. Fortunately, most of the responses were affirmingly positive, but for some, in reminiscing of past experiences at different COC, they did not share the same adoration for their lead minister's preaching. From the corresponding interview questions of, "What is it like to listen to your lead minister?", "How would you define an 'inspirational message?'", "How would you define an 'educational message?'" and "How would you define a 'scriptural message?'" the following themes were repeatedly defined: educational and applicable.

Educational

John, a member of his church for over twenty years, who has also sat at the feet of three different lead ministers in that duration, said that he "expected the fulfillment of the responsibilities which had been bestowed upon the lead minister by the leadership of the church." When asked by the research what "fulfillment of responsibilities" John was referencing, John mentioned preaching with "sound doctrine" and "in accordance with God's word." Furthermore, John indicated that without proper education, much harm could be done in the spiritual life and health of the church, as some preachers lead people astray under the same disguise of "education." With the researcher's request for explanation of his candid expression, John elucidated the term with positive and grateful tones, clarifying that all the lead ministers in

his COC's history had walked into the pulpit adequately prepared to speak on behalf of the Lord. John admitted that "leading people away" had not happened in his COC, but it had regrettably occurred in other COC in John's immediate area and in John's past environments. To John, it was evident that his lead minister had spent many hours in preparation and prayer, and consequently, the message was "delivered with passion" and "heard with conviction". John personally described the many things he had learned sitting at the feet of gospel preachers at his COC, ranging from background history to the meaning of different Greek words.

Michael, a new Christian, mentioned how his understanding of God had been shaped by the pulpit. He repeatedly described messages conveying "deep truths he did not know". Becoming a Christ follower in 2009, he attributed much of his personal development and faith understanding to that which flows from the pulpit. Michael was clear, however, not to remove personal responsibility of study and devotion from the equation.

Tim described the preaching of his lead minister as instruction which made him "consider something in a fresh way." Even though Tim is a "new" member of his COC, Tim has been a Christian for over forty years, attending COC exclusively. In that span of time, Tim has heard hundreds, if not thousands of sermons. According to Tim, for him to consider a topic or passage with "fresh eyes and interest" is a big compliment.

Frank described the preaching of his lead minister as one which "brings history and the Bible together." Through these efforts, the lead minister provides background information that deepens Frank's perception of the text. According to Frank, these pieces of information provide a different level of understanding and appreciation for the teaching.

Lisa said that her lead minister ably spoke to the "analytical side of faith." According to Lisa, this was a unique talent, considering that Lisa also said that her lead minister carried the

persona of a “colleague unpretentiously speaking to another colleague.” Lisa praised her lead minister for “making the scholarly sound simple.”

Caleb described the experience of listening to his lead minister as a “treat”. Having been a member of his COC for over twenty years, he vividly remembered when his church was between lead ministers. Members of a rotating committee handled the weekly preaching, but they were not experienced preachers. Caleb described that experience as “not ideal,” pointing to the importance for a strong, competent, and experienced lead minister in the pulpit every week “who can speak to the church on behalf of God.” Caleb remembered the lead minister’s first sermon over a decade ago, entitled, “The Bread of Life.” From that moment, Caleb knew that his COC had hired “someone special to do great things for the church.”

Thomas described the preaching of his minister as both “clear” and “passionate.” For Thomas, these communicative attributes were formative to his faith. Thomas described himself as a “simple minded”, and thus, when he can understand the lead minister’s intentional “everyman prose,” Thomas feels connected to the message and the messenger. Additionally, Thomas confirmed that he never doubted if his lead minister believed the truth of the message he was presenting. His emotions flowed through his preaching and mannerisms, proving that he was speaking deep from the heart. Thomas was appreciative of his lead minister because he had an “open dialogue” policy with the church. When asked by the researcher to expound on an “open dialogue” policy, Thomas explained that the lead minister continually invited the church to meet with him in person, send him an email, or call him on his cell phone, if they heard something in a sermon or Bible class that they did not understand, wanted more information about, or disagreed with. The lead minister wanted the church to feel comfortable and welcome to challenge or converse with him concerning the text to better create an environment of the “priesthood of all

believers,” minimizing any potential gap between the “clergy and “laity” within the congregation.

Lydia told a story of conversion, attributed to the preaching of her lead minister. From a recent series from the book of Leviticus, a Jewish visitor was baptized and converted to Christ at their COC. Lydia applauded the uniqueness of the situation, with a predominantly Jewish book in the Bible converting a Jew to Christianity. Lydia recalled this story to communicate her opinion that effective preaching contains an educational realm.

Bill continually used the word “balanced” to describe the preaching of his lead minister. Through discovery of Bill’s explanation for the word “balanced,” the researcher learned that Bill had spent time as a minister at a small, rural congregation. To Bill, “balanced” preaching consisted of a “healthy diet of expository, topical, and textual themes.” It moves back and forth from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and it takes very seriously the admonition from the apostle Paul to preach “the whole counsel of God” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 20: 28). Because of this organized approach to a “balanced” preaching diet, Bill quickly said that he “looked forward to every message” from his lead minister because it “informed and equipped the listener for Christian living.” Bill described his lead minister’s preaching as “God-breathed”, further quoting the Scripture from Paul to the young preacher Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training for righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 3: 16-17). Because of his lead minister’s commitment to using the biblical text for the substance of his messages, Bill said that he was “well-fed” with a “spiritual feast” when his minister stepped into the pulpit; according to Bill, a “must-have” when choosing a new COC.

Susan recalled a recent sermon which provided her new understanding, and further connection, from Jewish sacrifice to Jesus's crucifixion. Though Susan had been raised in a COC her entire life, she "saw things and heard things in this message she had never seen before." When asked by the researcher what specifically in the message provided her new understanding, Susan attributed it to a plethora of "historical information that complimented biblical fact." Because the lead minister expounded on the culture of the Israelites in the Old Testament, Susan was able to better understand the cultural and spiritual significance of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross in first century context.

Bob was thankful for the lead minister's commitment to bringing "archaeological and historical context" into every sermon. According to Bob, it helped him identify with the people of the Bible and the expectations for his own life. Bob identified his lead minister's preaching as "educational" and "formative" for his personal faith development. Bob clarified that this was a more positive sermon evaluation than he had offered in the past about other lead ministers he had heard and known.

Hayley was not raised in COC but was reared and trained in a well-known denomination within Christendom. With appreciation, Hayley attributed her spiritual development and biblical understanding to the influence of her lead minister. When asked by the researcher how her lead minister had shaped her spirituality, Hayley replied, "For starters, he actually teaches the Bible." Hayley expounded that growing up in the denomination of her youth, the Bible was rarely taught, or even discussed. In her teenage years, she was instructed about spiritual matters through catechisms and other supplemental, denominational learning tools. Hayley described the expository sermons at her COC as "refreshing and informative." She readily admitted that because she found COC later in life, not "every COC would help her grow." Hayley, a pediatric

psychologist, described herself as a “deep thinker and searcher for truth.” She also defined her lead minister’s preaching as “intellectually stimulating,” providing her the freedom to go deeper in her own faith through biblical preaching. “Surface level” teaching and preaching does not satisfy Hayley’s aspiration to ponder the inscrutable matters of life. With a gentle laugh, Hayley divulged, “I do not want to be bored at church,” and she quickly ratified that the preaching of her lead minister did not lead her to the perils of boredom, but challenged her to grow with positive, rather than negative, connotations. Hayley also commended her preacher for being “biblical but not in the stone age.” When asked by the researcher to clarify her dichotomy, Hayley explained that in her opinion, lead ministers (and churches) must be educated about the circumstances and trends of culture “outside the doors of faith” to “recapture them to the truths of the Bible.” In her line of work as a pediatric psychologist, Hayley explained that she was aware of “conversations at American dinner tables” and “cognitive and emotional patterns of behavior” within children and teens of today’s world. Hayley expressed her concern that COC will struggle to reach today’s youth, and their parents, without ably engaging in these cultural conversations and behavioral patterns from a biblical perspective. According to Hayley, her COC was apt to address difficult exchanges from the pulpit and Bible classes, providing a “safe space” for “healthy and meaningful interaction.” Hayley attributed the sizeable numerical growth in membership and weekly attendance of her COC to unique dialogue through preaching not accustomed to many COC.

Peter described an inimitable contrast in the educational strength of his lead minister’s preaching. By Peter’s evaluation, his lead minister was a “theologian, scholar, and apologist,” who possessed a “deep foundational level of theology.” At the same time, Peter observed that his lead minister’s preaching was “easy to follow and understand.” Peter believed that it would be

“easy to invite a neighbor to church” because they would hear something in the sermon that they found both “interesting” and “informative.” In Peter’s view, the ability to make complex issues simple speaks to the intellectual depth of the lead minister. When asked by the researcher how he would define an “educational sermon,” Peter described it as a time to “provide different perspectives and open eyes to truths not already known.” Peter quickly admitted that “educational sermons” were his “favorite sermons.”

Terry repeatedly described his lead minister’s preaching as “thought-provoking” and “deeply prepared and researched.” When asked by the researcher what stimulated Terry’s thought processes, Terry depicted how he had heard his lead minister preach on the same passage on different occasions, but make different points or provide different perspectives, all of which were doctrinally sound and consistent with the biblical author’s intent. Terry said that through his lead minister’s preaching, he often realized he “had never considered that before” and was challenged to leave worship services on Sunday and further investigate the passage or biblical idea through his own research. He was appreciative of the numerous “cross references” provided by the lead minister in his sermons and Bible classes, which prompted further study by the congregation, connecting Old Testament and New Testament themes.

Applicable

James, a “new” member of his COC, said that applicable teaching has the ability “to prick his heart.” It was produced in James’s days of consideration and action. The sermon’s effectiveness traveled well beyond the walls of the sanctuary.

Carol described her lead minister’s preaching as that which “equipped her to serve in a better way.” Carol, like her husband Tim, has been a member of the COC for most of her adult life. She has heard countless sermons and classes; therefore, applicable preaching is the boost she

needs for zeal and involvement with the Kingdom. Carol connected her appreciation for the preaching of their lead minister on his ability to “be one of us.” Carol further explained that a minister’s ability to relate with his audience, as one who walks down similar paths of life with similar struggles, concerns, and worries, holds the attention of the audience and connects with the flock in powerful ways. Carol believes that when the lead minister can also just be a “member,” his teaching firmly plants in the lives of his listeners.

For John, preaching which “connects to me personally” is the preaching which “leads to a significant change.” There was a notable consensus among participants that without a sermon’s application, the sermon is not deeply heard or readily accepted. They needed to know why it mattered and how it affected their lives.

Frank described his lead minister as one who preached “like a good friend telling you a story.” He was not concerned about impressing or entertaining the audience with theological jargon and philosophical theories. He was simply a peer, yearning to impart the words of life. In Frank’s estimation, his lead minister’s “down to earth” approach was one of his most effective traits.

Lisa described her lead minister as one who “speaks from his heart to yours.” He is a colleague who “understands us.” She also described his preaching and teaching as “easily identifiable to my own life.” Personal connection with the lead minister greatly influenced Lisa’s desire to carefully listen to his messages.

Caleb positively described the “COC approach” to preaching as focusing on the text and then providing a personal story or illustration, rather than giving a personal story or illustration and then finding a text to support the story. Caleb believed that Scripture producing the sermon

was the faithful way to proclaim the Word. He appreciatively noted that his lead minister preached with such prerogative.

Sarah praised the preaching of her lead minister as “welcoming, loving, and full of words that spoke to her everyday life.” When asked by the researcher to define “words that spoke to her everyday life,” Sarah clarified that illustrations and “take-a-aways” in teaching jived with everyday experiences. She understood what the lead minister was describing because she faced the same situations and challenges. Sarah believed that her lead minister, through his preaching and teaching, worked hard to connect with the people on the pew in various ways through different preaching styles, methods, and illustrations.

Carl attributed his family’s membership in their COC of fourteen years to the presence of their lead minister. Specifically, Carl proclaimed, “he is a big reason why we have stayed rather than attending other COC.” Carl also said his lead minister does a great job connecting today’s culture to Scripture. Through his own humor and possessing a healthy barometer on current events, Carl’s lead minister “brings it all together.” Before finishing his discourse on the lead minister’s preaching effectiveness, Carl mentioned a recent sermon series over the Ten Commandments which Carl rated as “outstanding.” The researcher asked Carl to disclose what he found to be so helpful and encouraging about the series. Carl mentioned that through the series, the lead minister, “explained to us what the commandments meant then and what they still mean for us today.” Carl also indicated that in the series, Carl learned many things about Jewish history, the Jewish law, and the background of the Israelite nation.

Casandra defined her lead minister’s preaching as “genuine in relatability.” When asked to expound on the term, Casandra clarified, “He knows what we are going through, and he

preaches to those issues.” She added that her lead minister was quick to remind the church family that he dealt with the same issues. They were “in this together.”

Lydia noted that her lead minister’s sermons were not driven by “pop culture.” The researcher asked her to define that description, and Lydia clarified that her lead minister had a masterful way of bringing in current events into the sermon to illustrate the biblical text, but he did not use current events as the foundation of his sermon. It was “Bible first, news second.” According to Lydia, by this approach, messages were “timely” and “personal” to an urban congregation.

Bill praised his lead minister for not using “preacher stories.” That term also struck this researcher as unique. Bill explained that “preacher stories” were illustrations that were meant to be funny but “rarely were” or “tales that seemed outdated or overused.” Rather, Bill loved how his lead minister would illustrate the text through other Bible themes, narratives, and teachings. He used the “text in context” to bring it to life, and in doing so, Scriptures and teachings seem personal.

Susan commended her lead minister for his ability to “connect with things of today.” When asked by the researcher to expound on her statement, Susan mentioned how a recent message used a scene from the television series *Walking Dead* to illustrate a biblical point. She laughed and said, “I have never heard *Walking Dead* quoted from the pulpit before.” Susan recognized that she was a new member of a church in north Dallas with a younger membership, increasing the likelihood of sermon illustrations from recent television productions, but she believed the principle was true. Susan believes that when preachers can build a bridge between everyday life and the biblical text, they captivate the audience with important truths.

Bob, a new Christian but not new to his COC, described the preaching of his lead minister as “encouraging” and “powerful” teaching that spurred him to “be better in his walk with Christ.” Before becoming a devout Christian, Bob heard different preachers and attended different churches, including, but not limited to, COC. Since becoming a Christian, the preaching of his current lead minister helped him develop a more disciplined approach to discipleship and sanctified living.

Sue positively described the preaching of her minister as “different than what I grew up hearing.” When asked by the researcher how the preaching at her current COC was different than the COC of her youth, Sue explained that the preaching was “relatable to my life.” Sue also disclosed that she grew up in a COC that had been declining for many years and was “struggling to remain open.” She attributed several factors to the noticeable decline in numerical attendance and membership of her childhood COC, such as a being a “small, rural community, a major demographic of elderly people, and a lack of opportunities and programs for younger families.” Sue also included “out-of-touch” preaching as a perpetrator of congregational decline. Her current lead minister, however, was willing to “engage outside sources,” “discuss other religions,” and “approach real life challenges.” Sue believed this style of preaching is desperately needed for COC to grow.

Lucas proclaimed that his lead minister was “the main reason we chose our COC several years ago.” When asked by the researcher why Lucas attributed so much of their decision to the lead minister, Lucas explained that his lead minister’s preaching was “polished, prepared, balanced, and powerfully delivered.” As the son of a lead minister, Lucas admitted that he held high standards for effective preaching, but his lead minister met every benchmark. Through his preaching, Lucas was challenged and convicted, and he wanted his family to be exposed to

preaching which would provide the same outcomes for their spiritual journeys. As the conversation continued, more specific details emerged for why the lead minister's preaching was the leading culprit for the family's choice for their church home. Lucas described a sermon series in which the lead minister was preaching about the Holy Spirit. Lucas, "listened with great interest" because in Lucas's former COC, sermons over the Holy Spirit "greatly concerned him" due to their inaccurate portrayal of biblical teachings and the Holy Spirit's description therein. Lucas mentioned how on that specific morning, the lead minister discussed the Spirit "speaking" to people today. Lucas leaned on the corner of his seat with eager anticipation, and grave distress, for what the lead minister might say next. Much to Lucas' pleasure and relief, the lead minister held up his Bible and said, "If you claim that the Holy Spirit told you something that is not in here [the Bible], you are wrong!" Silence covered the auditorium, but Lucas leaned over to his wife and said, "We are home!" Due to the lead minister's "dedicated respect for biblical teaching," Lucas and his family placed membership the next Sunday.

Joe described his lead minister's preaching as "formative to his spiritual growth." He acknowledged that his lead minister tackled tough subjects "without a hell, fire, and brimstone approach." Joe, in his mid-thirties, who has been raised in COC, expressed concern about COC "losing touch with society" through hesitancy to preach and teach on modern issues. He was pleased, however, that the lead minister at his current COC (different than the COC of his youth) frequently and eagerly addressed cultural conversations and challenges from the pulpit "from a place of grace and truth" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 1: 14), rather than from being an "angry Bible thumper." Joe also acknowledged that in his approach to preach on these secular subjects, the Bible is not "sprinkled into" the messages, but the sermons are intentionally

“built around the Bible.” Because of these factors, Joe’s faith has blossomed in the last several years of sitting at the feet of his lead minister.

Cynthia mentioned how her Bible is “full of notations” with “catchy phrases” or “profound insights” her lead minister has made from the pulpit. When asked by the researcher why Cynthia makes these notations in her Bible, or “circles important words”, Cynthia explained that these notations in the margins provided her “important reminders for everyday living.” She might not remember an entire sermon, every verse quoted, or every point made, but she reviews notations in the margins of her Bible to strengthen her faith. Cynthia was very thankful to have a lead minister who provides “material for her margins.”

Summary of Research Question 1

Members of COC believe that the preaching of their lead minister is critical to the progression of faith. Since faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 10:17), God depends on his messengers to be a faithful mouthpiece. God has operated this way through the dispensation of both the new and old covenants. COC recognize and value the importance of powerful and sound proclamation of God’s word.

Participants described influential preaching with two resounding terms: educational and applicable. Educational preaching explains complex issues while applicable preaching provides tangible advice for Christian practice. While educational preaching is necessary for the presentation of doctrine and salvation, applicable preaching is vital for the furthering of discipleship and sanctified living. One cannot be sacrificed for the other. Both educational and applicable preaching help shape spiritual formation of members and numerical growth of congregations.

Research Question 2

In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the pastoring of their lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

This open-ended research question sought to understand how prominent of a role the preacher's pastoring, often designated as "shepherding" and "congregational care" plays in the lives of believers. From the corresponding interview questions of "How would you define the word 'pastoral?'" and "What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith?", the following themes were continually defined: example, available.

Example

Paul and Lydia, a husband and wife of a church in north Dallas, both spoke of how their lead minister "does what he says we should do." Specifically, they noted his involvement in small groups, food pantry distribution, and helping members move houses. They described it as "refreshing" and "unusual" to see a lead minister "roll up his sleeves and work with us." For Paul and Lydia, they believed these factors proved that their lead minister was more than just talk. They compared his actions to what Paul penned in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011).

Cassandra affirmed that the strongest thing her lead minister does for her faith is "living every day what he preaches on Sunday." Through her lead minister's discipline and unwavering commitment to Christ, he encourages others to align their lives with biblical teaching and completely surrender to the Lordship of Jesus. The transparency of his actions unveiled that the lead minister's life was hidden with Christ (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 3:4).

Bill described his lead minister as one who is “genuine, real, and lives what he preaches.” Though Bill’s lead minister is only in his late thirties, Bill described him as a “congregational model.” When thinking of his lead minister’s life and persona, Bill quoted the following passage, “Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4:12).

Susan testified that her lead minister’s preaching was most effective because of the “way he presented himself.” When asked by the researcher for an example or explanation, Susan described her lead minister as someone who was “genuine and sincere.” More specifically, Susan commented that her lead minister “presents truth not for truth’s sake but for your sake.” Susan believed her lead minister sincerely wanted her COC to hear the truth more than hearing him. Because of these virtuous qualities, coupled with the life he lives in personal discipleship, Susan is anxious to listen to the messages her lead minister presents every week.

Available

John unveiled the story of how he and his wife landed at their COC over twenty-five years ago. Upon moving to Dallas, they rented an apartment because they did not know how long, or if, they would stay in the area. Not long after having moved in, they received a personal visit from their lead minister at that time. His visit surprised them because they thought in the “big city” and “large church,” ministers would not make much, if any, personal contact with members. John and his wife had moved from a small, rural church where it was normal and expected. They were delighted to find a sense of familiarity. That visit was followed by other visits from different church members, phone calls, and even meals. According to John, he and his wife knew that they “came to the right place” because this church was a “family.” John

believed this is also a big reason why their COC is growing—the “family feel” and “strong sense of community.” John was careful to clarify that this familial connectedness was championed by the lead minister.

Caleb said, “If a church can find a lead minister who can preach and pastor, that church has found a real winner.” Caleb explained that some preachers were excellent in the pulpit but lacked people skills, while others were very friendly and approachable but were not talented communicators. Finding a lead minister who is effective in both areas is a real challenge, but Caleb believed that his COC had employed that individual, a key reason why their COC was in numerical growth. Their lead minister is accessible to the church both inside the pulpit and outside of the pulpit, and therefore, the church views him as a central figure to the church’s leadership.

Bob noted how his lead minister is “always there.” When asked by the researcher, Bob explained how his lead minister was present in times of crisis and entrenched into the conversation at hand. Bob mentioned how in his faith journey, since becoming a Christian, he had felt comfortable with approaching the lead minister after services or during the week to ask Bible questions. When having these conversations, Bob felt “at ease” because of the genuine disposition of the lead minister. When asked questions, the lead minister’s answers were clear and informative, but also full of grace (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 4:6), without judgment. According to Bob, these conversations were equally, if not more powerful, than lessons he had heard his lead minister present from the pulpit. The one-on-one time with his spiritual mentor produced significant dividends in his spiritual life. With the lead minister viewed by Bob as an “old school, grandfather figure,” Bob trusts the counsel which flows from his persona.

In addition to his lead minister's preaching, Joe described his affinity for his lead minister because of their "frequent lunch meetings." A monthly occurrence, Joe explained how these gatherings helped them "understand and know each other." Joe was appreciative of the relationship dynamics which had developed—a time of "sharing and holding each other accountable." He is most thankful that he can "talk with my friend about my struggles with without feeling like I am talking with my preacher." The lead minister's casual accommodation helps Joe "feel and stay connected with the man who teaches every week from God's word."

Peter acknowledged that his lead minister "made a habit to attend events he did not plan." For Peter, this was a strong representation of his lead minister's love for the church. With a membership of 1000 people, Peter said it would be "easy to hide in the shadows" and let someone else bear the brunt of responsibility. However, Peter was impressed that his lead minister tried to be seen and to visit with as many members as possible while he was attending events outside of normal worship services and Bible classes.

Cynthia specifically noted how her lead "always goes out his way to say hello." Cynthia clarified that she was not the only one who had noticed the lead minister's commitment to mingle with the flock. It was clear to Cynthia, and others, that the lead minister wanted to shake as many hands and make as many greetings as possible, not in a "shallow, political way," but because he truly cares to visit with the entire church family.

Summary of Research Question 2

Members of COC believed that the pastoring of their lead minister is critical to the progression of faith. Since ministers are called to make serious investment in the physical, emotional, and spiritual lives of their flock (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4; 16), the importance of committed pastoring cannot be overvalued. A COC recognizes and

appreciates the beauty of a lead minister who commits to pastoral responsibility. For several of the participants, the lead minister's pastoring was more influential to their spiritual health and progression than their lead minister's preaching.

Participants described influential pastoring with two resonant descriptions: example and available. When a lead minister is an example for the flock to follow, they are drawn to his presence and challenged by his influence. They trust his teaching because it is backed by his life. When a lead minister is available to his flock, they seek his counsel and yearn for his time. They know that he will be present at the most difficult moments and on the most daunting days. If a lead minister fails to provide pastoral care, his preaching will struggle to resonate.

Research Question 3

In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the preaching of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

This open-ended research question sought to understand the type of preaching needed for and well received by each COC participating in the study. From the corresponding interview questions of “What is like to listen to your lead minister?”, “How would you define an “inspirational message?””, “How would you define an ‘educational message?’”, and “How would you define a ‘scriptural message?’”, the following themes were continually defined by “devoted” members (attending worship services at least twice a month) of their COC: biblical, inspirational.

Biblical

John proclaimed that everything in a sermon or Bible class “must tie back to the Scriptures.” He expressed great concern with the departure of many COC from the Scriptures

and biblical “patterns for the church.” John, a devoted member, and “charter member” since the church’s inauguration, said that “without great preaching there would be times we would want to leave.” but “unbiblical preaching would assure our departure.” John also noted that in the church’s nearly thirty-year history, served by three different lead ministers, his COC has always been a “church of the Book.” John noted that a lead minister’s ability to “connect history’s events with biblical teachings deepened his faith and trust in the Word of God” and that lead minister who is “well versed in the writings and teachings of ancient philosophers” brings out many things John did not personally know or understand, enhancing his spiritual depth.

Frank specifically mentioned how his lead minister frequently states from the pulpit, “I love to hear those Bible pages turn” when he is referencing different passages in his sermons. With this familiar statement, the lead minister emphasizes the importance of not only biblically based preaching, but the congregation following along with him in the Scriptures. His lead minister does not want the church to simply “take his word for it”, but he wants them to be like the “Noble Bereans” who checked the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 17:11).

Paul complimented his lead minister’s commitment to the Scripture thus, “he leans on the Spirit’s guidance for the messages he brings.” When asked by the researcher to expound on that evaluation, Paul clarified that his lead minister did not just “randomly pick” what he should preach about, or simply “rotate through old sermons,” but he tried to be “in step with the Spirit” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Galatians 5: 22), depending on the Spirit to help him understand what sermons to preach and when. The lead minister was carefully attentive to the privations of the church and the seasons they are experiencing. Paul said that in all times, his lead minister “faithfully represents God’s word and knows what we need.”

Lisa frequently described the preaching of her lead minister as preaching which was “sufficiently devoted to Scripture,” supporting every sermon point with biblical texts. She expressed concern about churches and lead ministers who do not supplement their teachings or doctrinal convictions with biblical support. For Lisa, having a lead minister who can defend his teaching through the Bible is imperative for the health of any church. According to Lisa, “churches do not need to know what the preacher thinks, but what the Bible says.”

In describing the focus of her lead minister’s preaching, Sarah stated that she knew every sermon would be about “Jesus and only Jesus.” When asked by the researcher if the lead minister preached sermons on other topics such as the prophets, the letters of Paul, or the pastoral epistles, Sarah clarified that her lead minister preaches on all facets of the Bible, but in every sermon, he connects the teachings to Jesus. He is gospel centered.” For Sarah, this is not only foundational and formative for her faith, but it was preaching which she can easily bring friends and family to hear her minister who are not Christians. If they come to her COC, they are guaranteed to hear about Jesus Christ.

Cassandra praised the biblical nature of her lead minister’s preaching by mentioning his commitment to differentiating from the pulpit what is “tradition” and what is “truth”. With a humble spirit, the lead minister often reminds the congregation that something which is “different” is not necessarily “sinful.” From Cassandra’s perspective, this balance of tradition verses truth produces numerical growth in their COC as they embrace the changes of culture without compromising the calling of Scripture.

John esteemed his lead minister as a preacher who is “willing to have the hard conversations.” According to John, his lead minister does not cower to the cultural pressures of the day. He faces political, moral, or controversial topics “with a Bible in his hand.” For John,

knowing that his lead minister has the courage to unashamedly speak out against the tides of time empowers John to be ready to give an answer for the hope that John places in Jesus.

Sue mentioned her appreciation for her lead minister's sermon never "resting on his opinion." Rather, her lead minister is quick to preface statements with, "The Bible says." According to Sue, her lead minister's sermons "tie back to Scripture."

Lucas affirmed that his lead minister takes very seriously his responsibility to "present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2: 15). Additionally, Lucas complimented his lead minister's "devotion to apostolic authority" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 2: 42), seeking biblical example for both preaching and practice. As a student of preaching, Lucas admitted his preference for "expository," verse-by-verse" preaching which lends itself to "correctly defining the context," while also confirming that his lead minister strikes a healthy balance between expository and topical preaching, which is" also helpful in faith development."

Jason repeatedly commended the biblical tenacity of his lead minister's preaching, describing it as "faithful and true to the Book." When asked why his COC was growing when others in the same geographical area were declining, Jason, an elder in his COC, attributed the growth to "firm commitment to the preaching and teaching of the truth in God's word." He confirmed that the COC would never "depart from the pattern" found therein, specifically mentioning how other COC in the area, under the "guise of growth" had departed from key New Testament doctrines and had lost many members in the process. According to Jason, though his congregation was "swelling" from members of nearby COC, God was "blessing them for holding firm to truth." Jason did acknowledge that they needed to continue to grow with conversions of

unbelievers in addition to the “swelling” of other Christians seeking a new COC. As an elder over finance, Jason had also studied in recent months the charitable giving percentages across the church family. Without knowing specific charitable amounts, his research did unveil that a higher percentage of their charitable giving was supported by members under the age of sixty-five than over the age of sixty-five. Jason provided this data to support the notion that they were growing and swelling with young families. Therefore, those “leaving for truth” were not confined to elderly members who did not enjoy “modern teaching styles.” According to Jason, the search for truth is a timeless quest that is not limited to a single generation.

Joe mentioned how in his experiences with different COC, specifically the COC of his youth, there was a fear that the church “would lose their doctrine in attempt to meet people where they were.” Joe unmistakably condemned such attitudes, stating that “churches can be missional without sacrificing truth.” Specifically, Joe noted how his lead minister openly and directly preaches on homosexuality, racism, and gender identity with grace and understanding, while also pointing to God’s directives and desires for such challenges. According to Joe, they are “cultural conversations driven by biblical truths,” thus making the church relevant to the community, and consequently, a growing COC.

Inspirational

John said that inspirational preaching does not necessarily answer every question, but it leaves him feeling confident in his faith. In that same vein, John said that too much use of ancient, biblical languages such as Hebrew and Greek “loses him” and that he would imagine others would say the same. To summarize, inspirational preaching is less about big words and academic phrases and more about moving a person’s faith from point A to point B.

Frank mentioned how his lead minister's preaching brings the "biblical greats down to our level." Through this exposition, Frank is reminded that he is "not alone." Frank mentioned the great passage which reminds all believers, "...since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Hebrews 12:1). Christians today are fighting the same battles Christians fought yesterday.

Caleb described the preaching style of his lead minister as "reflective." Specifically noting his lead minister's refusal to be a "hell fire and brimstone preacher," Caleb argued that a "reflective" communication style made the listener seriously consider the eternal implications of their choices. The lead minister does not have to scare people about hell because hell is purposefully scary. In Caleb's opinion, calling people to seriously consider their actions through reflective meditation, rather than intimidating coercion, is most inspirationally effective. He also reported that his lead minister was "comfortable with making the church uncomfortable", and that moves people to greater action and change. Additionally, the lead minister was the "first thing guests will hear" and their "first experience with the church", so the lead minister can either make or break church growth.

Carl said that his lead minister was willing to "challenge him and step on his toes." However, Carl also said that if a lead minister had a good heart and was a strong student of the Word, he would listen to any challenging message, recognizing it as a message from God. His lead minister does not "hold back any punches" and is bold in his preaching, but with a loving tone. His sermons can move Carl to sign up for a men's retreat he really does not want to attend or teach a class he really does not want to teach or lead a small group rather than simply being a participant. Carl also mentioned that because of the lead minister's teaching and leadership, the

COC has developed a “culture of expectation”; meaning, simply occupying a chair in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings was not an option. Members, both new and old, are expected to participate in ministries, programs, and outreach efforts of the church. According to Carl, “everyone feels like this church is theirs” and “no one feels comfortable just sitting in a chair.” The attitude and atmosphere are a direct extension of the lead minister’s influence. Carl ended the segment with the high compliment of his lead minister, “He is not just my minister, he is my friend.”

With thanksgiving, Casandra spoke of the power of her lead minister’s preaching by experiencing it through the eyes of her eighteen-year-old daughter. Recently, their minister was given a sabbatical by the church where he escaped for several Sundays to rest, study, and be in prayer about future messages. After five weeks of not having him in the pulpit, he returned home. On his first Sunday back, after the sermon was over, Casandra’s daughter said to her mom, “I am so glad he is back. I was tired of the other preachers. I never knew how much I appreciated him until now.” Casandra noted that if a lead minister can make eighteen-year-old “miss” sermons, he must be doing something right.

Lydia connected the growth of her COC to the vision of the lead minister and the elders. Lydia admitted that their church is positioned in a rapidly growing suburb on the north side of Dallas and that “people are moving in all the time.” However, for Lydia, the growth is driven by spiritual, rather than geographical initiatives. Lydia said, “Our lead minister has encouraged and modeled for us to be a church of prayer, faith, and willingness to take risks.” When asked by the researcher what “risks” she was referencing, Lydia quickly referenced the purchase of property and then the commitment to a church plant, even when their current property was too small for

their current membership. According to Lydia, these initiatives were strengthened by the preaching and dreams of the lead minister.

Jason, an elder in his COC, extolled his lead minister for having the ability to “get us out of our comfort zone.” Jason acknowledged how his COC has been “uniquely blessed” with “great preaching, sustainable growth, and a paid for facility.” Jason admitted, however, that with these blessings, it is “easy to become stagnant” and “shift into autopilot rather than being intentional about church growth and faith development.” According to Jason, his lead minister has the unique ability to help the church, more specifically the eldership, “think differently and critically about the church’s mission and methods in today’s world.”

Alex, a “devoted” member who has been at his COC for over twenty-five years, acknowledged that their current lead minister has brought “new life” and “new energy” to their COC. Alex clarified that the former lead minister was well loved, deeply appreciated, and an excellent “preacher,” but that the new lead minister “hit his stride” and “developed a niche” that was serving the church very well. When asked by the researcher to expound on the “niche,” Alex mentioned how the lead minister has brought new ideas and new programs and service projects for the congregation, specifically on Sunday evenings. These programs involve children and families as they serve together and discuss new ways to better reach their local community. These programs are not simply “fellowship initiatives,” but they are built into recent sermon series about the church’s identity, purpose, and mission. Alex indicated that the lead minister’s preaching and pastoring are interconnected, with sermons proclaiming the life to be heard and the pastoring the life to be seen. In addition to these observations, when asked by the researcher why his COC had seen tremendous growth over the years, Alex indicated that the lead minister’s conviction then, and now, was to “unashamedly preach the truth.” Because his COC did not

compromise on key doctrinal beliefs, Alex believed many are drawn to their COC. Alex also observed, “A lead minister can sink a congregation, or maintain a congregation, but it is very difficult for him to grow the congregation on his own.” Alex also attributed the growth of his COC to an excellent youth program and children’s ministry, because “when the kids want to be involved, so do the parents.” According to Alex, his COC offers great programs for the kids, and great preaching for the adults. With these two forces combined, Alex believes even more numerical growth for their COC is likely in the future.

Summary of Research Question 3

Devoted members of COC believed that the preaching of their lead minister is critical to the numerical growth of their COC. Certain characteristics of preaching are necessary to connect with membership. Without these attributes, proclamation from the pulpit is senseless noise (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 13: 1).

Devoted members described influential preaching with the following key terms: biblical and inspirational. If a lead minister is not using Holy Scripture as the authority of his preaching, devoted members are not interested in hearing his thoughts or teachings. Devoted members desired sermons and Bible classes solidly built on the Word of God, so they can capably withstand the storms of life (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 7: 24-27). Additionally, devoted members craved preaching that spurs them to action and greater commitment, love, and service within the Kingdom of God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Hebrews 10: 24). It is vital to preach directly from the word of God (“biblical”), but it is tragic when preaching does not stimulate or encourage (“inspirational”). Holy Scripture is not boring and cannot be communicated in humdrum fashion. The words of the Bible are the words of life (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 6: 68)

Research Question 4

In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the pastoring of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

This open-ended research question sought to understand the nature of pastoring needed for each COC participating in the study. From the corresponding interview questions of “How would you define the word ‘pastoral?’”, “What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith?”, and “Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not?”, the following themes were continually defined by “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members who possessed an educated understanding of the dynamics of their COC: humble, servant, and impartial.

Humble

Paul told a story about the recent, mock resignation of his lead minister. A few weeks before the interview with the researcher, his lead minister expressed to the congregation that after much prayer, fasting, and meditation, he had chosen to pursue a different path for his future. There was silence in the auditorium. The lead minister broke the silence by saying, “I have decided to declare myself eligible for the NBA draft.” This joke frustrated Paul. When the lead minister was making this statement, without Paul knowing it was a joke, Paul immediately began to pray that God would send them the right man to lead their church from the pulpit. He was emotional and concerned but knew God would provide. After realizing it was a joke, Paul confronted the lead minister in the foyer and said, “Do not ever do that again!” In her interview, Paul’s wife, Lydia, mentioned the same event, and said, “I could not talk to him for weeks” because the mock resignation frustrated her so much. On the way home, Paul evaluated

emotions, trying to discern why he and his wife were so upset. He realized it was because their lead minister devoted such energy and commitment to serving the church outside of the pulpit through hospital visitation, counseling, prayer time, and other pastoral duties, that the church would not be the same without him. Paul later explained the impact of his lead minister's pastoral presence on their COC. He told the researcher, "I am not telling you anything I would not say if my lead minister was sitting here with us. He is not the best preacher I have ever heard, but he is the best minister I have ever seen." For Paul, this was the highest praise a lead minister could receive. In Paul's opinion, his COC would not be what it is without his lead minister's commitment to the flock through his humble spirit.

Lisa described her lead minister's pastoral effectiveness in his preaching, not necessarily separating the two. She described how her lead minister's preaching "validates our own failures and weaknesses, including his own." By pointing to biblical heroes who struggled to "always get it right," it showed the humanity of biblical heroes and the sinful brokenness of all human beings. According to Lisa, her lead minister strikes a healthy balance of being a leader to follow while being a colleague who makes mistakes. Lisa loved how in his preaching, which complemented his pastoring, her lead minister would often begin a hard segment of preaching by stating, "I am preaching this to myself as much as anyone else in this room, if not more. We are all in this together." According to Lisa, this highlighted his desire to be a "member" more than just the "preacher." He struggles like everyone in the room.

Lucas defined his lead minister's pastoral rhythm as "caring, loving, listening, sacrificing, and leading, like Jesus." When asked by the researcher to quantify these virtues, Lucas expounded, "He is a man of transparency who comes across as a fellow brother, not as a shielded figure on a pedestal. He has a desire to connect with people outside his teaching and

inside their hearts.” Lucas explained that though Lucas loved and respected the preaching of his lead minister, his lead minister’s pastoring had a “slight edge” on his preaching. He was talented in the pulpit, but he was “uniquely gifted” in his interaction with the flock. Lucas went on to tell a personal story of the first Sunday his family ever visited his COC. It was a smaller, start-up church at the time, with only one adult Bible class, which the lead minister was teaching. He would present for a few moments, and then he would break up the class into different discussion groups. When it was time to break out into discussion groups, Lucas and his wife did not have a group to assemble with, as they were sitting by themselves on the side of the room. To their surprise and relief, the lead minister quickly made his way over to them and insisted that he be in their group and get to know them and hear their thoughts about Scripture. According to Lucas, from that moment on, Lucas and his wife knew that their lead minister cherished the members of his church and wanted to have a relationship with them not just as their minister, but as their friend.

Hayley described the pastoral leadership of her lead minister as “gentle and patient leadership” rather than “a power status.” She went on to say that “the pulpit is just a piece of him.” When asked by the researcher how Hayley defined “power status,” Hayley mentioned that from her observation of different church leaders, some ministers attempt to “control,” “demean,” or “bully” from the pulpit. They use their stage as an opportunity to “elevate their theological education or spiritual importance.” Contrarily, her lead minister “uses the pulpit on Sunday to confirm his life on Monday.” Much to the praise of Hayley, her lead minister “listens more than he speaks,” which endears him to the congregation, especially to Hayley.

Servant

John mentioned how when Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 21:16) it was not a directive to preach as much as it was for Peter to care. According to John, preachers “walking the talk” was just as important as preachers “talking the walk.” John believed his lead minister was uniquely gifted in accomplishing both tasks.

Lydia noted her lead minister’s commitment to “serving alongside the saints”, whether it be in a Vacation Bible School, outreach ministry, or church wide fellowship. If the lead minister preaches on the importance of small groups, he attends a small group. He does not lead a group but participates like the rest of the church. To solidify the church’s commitment to small groups, the lead minister writes small group curriculum based on his sermons which are used by 60% of the small groups (the other 40% choose their own study material). Lydia greatly appreciated her lead minister’s numerous efforts outside of his immediate duties in the pulpit.

Caleb described the COC as an “entrepreneurial community.” The researcher asked Caleb to define the unique phrase, and Caleb explained, “If you want something, you go do it. If you need something, you go find it.” Caleb had been raised in the COC, and thus understands the autonomy of each congregation, which provides incredible freedom but also lacks significant funding from church synods or organizations. Caleb clarified that his lead minister possessed that same entrepreneurial spirit, willing to produce change and seek improvement through his own sweat equity.

Thomas described one of his lead minister’s best traits as his “commitment to visit hospitals.” It was common knowledge, which had become an endearing expectation of the congregation, that if a member was having surgery, the lead minister would make an appearance sometime in the hospital stay (often before the surgery) to pray with the patient. This brought tremendous comfort to the patient and the patient’s family, and it produced a deep connection to

and with the lead minister. Church members were reminded that the lead minister truly cared about the church. He was more than a “teacher,” he was a “minister.”

Carl mentioned how after the first Sunday his family visited his current COC, the lead minister was in his home a few days after, thanking them for their visit. He knocked on their door unexpectedly to meet them and pray for them. Carl also commented that in the fourteen years his family had been at the COC (which started in a school cafeteria), his family had witnessed and participated in the substantial growth trajectory of moving of out the school cafeteria, to securing a small building, to having two Sunday morning services in the building, to planting a church. In the different seasons of the church’s growth and change, the lead minister never lost his commitment to know the people by name, on a personal level, like he did for Carl’s family fourteen years ago in their living room. Carl proclaimed, “With incredible growth, it would be very easy for a lead minister to become more ‘hands off’ with his ministry, but he has remained central to every intersection of our church.”

With a tear in her eye, Casandra, Carl’s wife, mentioned another personal memory of her lead minister who attended the memorial service for Casandra’s mother. Casandra said, “He did not know my mom or anyone in my extended family. The only reason he was there was for me.” Since Casandra was touched by the lead minister’s efforts and presence on that difficult day, the researcher inquired how long it had been since her mother’s passing. Casandra said, “The memorial service was ten years ago last Mother’s Day, but I remember him (the lead minister) being there like it was yesterday.” For Casandra, this was one of the many ways that her lead minister embraced and lived the mission of her COC, to be “disciple making disciples.”

Sue spoke of her lead minister’s commitment to holding her accountable. To illustrate, she told a story from the COC of her youth. In the very small, rural COC, there was a “token

system” for tracking the members’ attendance at all church services. Due to the small number of believers attending the church, everyone was assigned a “token” with their name inscribed on the front and the back. The tokens were also color coded. Upon entering the doors of the auditorium for Sunday worship services, members would find their respective token and turn it over to the “present” side, accounting for their attendance. If they were absent, their token remained unturned, facing the “absent” side. The day following worship services, the lead minister would record the attendance through the counting and recording of the tokens. If a church member’s token was not flipped to “present”, they received a phone call from the lead minister inquiring for an explanation of their truancy. Sue believed that this “token system” was administered with harmless and loving intentions, but it was interpreted by several members, Sue included, with an opposite reaction. To Sue, this system seemed “domineering”, “nosy”, and “ingenuine.”

Contrarily, Sue’s lead minister in her COC of her adulthood, handles accountability in a different fashion. Even though her current COC is a church of more than 700 members, when absent, Sue still receives a personal phone call from her lead minister if he has not seen her for several weeks. These phone calls, however, serve a contrasting purpose. On the phone, the lead minister does not interrogatively inquire where Sue has been, but he eagerly communicates his desire to confirm her well-being, and to assure Sue that she is loved and missed. According to Sue, this deepened her appreciation for her lead minister, her church, and strengthened her resolve to be present whenever the doors are open.

Alex mentioned how he was most impressed by his lead minister’s ability to be “approachable, relatable, and always humble.” When asked by the researcher why Alex used the term “always humble”, Alex clarified that in his observation, many preachers struggle with egos, using the pulpit to unhealthily further influence and insincerely push agendas. For Alex, his

preacher was “down to earth”, and because of his attitude, Alex was drawn to listening to his messages. Alex also made a unique observation about a minister’s success and effectiveness with not just a COC, but any church. In Alex’s opinion, a lead minister “might be mediocre from the pulpit, but if he is humble and involved in the lives of people, it endears him to the church.” Alex quickly clarified that he did not believe his lead minister’s preaching was “mediocre.” Alex believes his lead minister is also an “excellent preacher,” but his ability to “connect with people” and “be one with the church” is “outstanding.”

Impartial

Paul described how his lead minister, after worship services, tries to shake the hand of every person in attendance. Paul also said, “he is excellent with names. If he does not remember your name by your second visit, he will certainly have it down by your third.” Paul admitted this ability to remember names was a “gift”, and difficult to accomplish with a congregation of over 500 people.

Similarly, Sarah, a member of a different church than Paul, described witnessing her lead minister intentionally rotating around the auditorium before and after services. Sarah clarified that the purpose was to send the message to members, “I am here for you.” This statement was often made from the pulpit but proved through his actions.

And yet, Frank and Lisa, members of a different church than Paul or Sarah, have similar perceptions of their lead minister’s habits after Sunday morning worship services. Frank and Lisa’s COC are larger than Paul and Sarah’s, and the auditorium is designed differently. Frank and Lisa’s auditorium has seven different points of egress. Frank and Lisa noted how their lead minister rotates where he stands each week after worship is over. Lisa said it was obvious that her lead minister “did not want to play favorites” and that he wanted to “know everyone in the

church.” For Frank, he noted how his lead minister did not want to “only be known by a few.” A small effort that paid significant dividends for connecting with the church.

Jason, a church leader in his COC, commended his lead minister for “being the same person inside and outside of the pulpit.” Jason described past lead ministers who would smile and laugh in the foyer, but when it was time to preach, they would use a different voice with a starkly contrasting countenance and demeanor while presenting the message. Furthermore, Jason commented his lead minister’s urgency to “meet with as many as possible, as soon as possible.” He mentioned witnessing his lead minister sit on a back pew after worship services were over in the corner of the auditorium, undistracted by others trying to speak with him, so that he could address a members’ concern or need in that moment. It was apparent to Jason that for his lead minister ministering to the flock was not something that could be “delayed” or “rescheduled.” From personal experience, Jason described how when his lead minister spoke with him before or after services in the foyer or auditorium, he made Jason feel like “he was the only one in the building.” The lead minister offered undivided entire attention to Jason, not pulling off to speak or wave to others who were passing. To Jason, this “spoke volumes.” It was not a show or an act. His lead minister “truly cares.” Finally, Jason offered an uncanny description of what he desired in a lead minister’s pastoring ability when he said, “someone who is confident on Sunday but capable Monday through Saturday.” When asked for a practical definition of this poetic line, Jason described it as someone who can “effectively teach from the pulpit and someone who can also effectively minister in various settings. From hospital visitation to holding a widow’s hand in her living room, he can do it all.” Jason acknowledged that these were tough assignments challenging expectations, but he was thankful that his lead minister excelled in multiple areas.

Summary of Research Question 4

Devoted members of COC believed that the pastoring of their lead minister is fundamentally connected to spiritual health. The church is called to function as a body, rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 12: 26). Lead ministers must plant their roots at the center of the “body.”

Devoted members described influential pastoring with three reverberating portrayals: humble, servant, and impartial. Devoted members are not drawn to follow an arrogant and pompous teacher. Respect cannot be demanded, but earned, and humility produces the esteem of others. Devoted members long to see a lead minister who is willing to “roll up his sleeves and get to work” as a fellow bond servant with the congregation. Hibernating to his office for study does not win the hearts of his listeners. Furthermore, devoted members yearn to observe equity across the membership by the lead minister. They are discouraged when he only associates with a “select few”, but they are encouraged when he strives to minister to each one. Effective pastoring covers a multitude of mistakes that arise from ineffective preaching. Preaching lasts for a moment, but pastoring lasts for life.

Research Question 5

When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s preaching, versus other factors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

This-open ended research question sought to understand the influence of a lead minister’s preaching with “new” (placing membership within the last year) members’ decision to make a COC their church home. From the corresponding interview questions of “What is like to listen to your lead minister?”, “How would you define an ‘inspirational message?’”, “How would you

define an ‘educational message?’”, and “How would you define a ‘scriptural message?’”, the following themes were continually defined by “new” members who had experienced a transition of church membership with the preaching of their new lead minister: biblical, challenging, dynamic.

Biblical

Michael, and his wife Claire, are not only “new” members but relatively “new” Christians, having decided to become a disciple of Jesus within the last decade. Michael and Claire told stories of experiencing different church homes based on job transfers. They landed in the thriving metropolis of Frisco, Texas within the last year, home base for several large corporations on the north side of Dallas. Michael said that he watched the lead minister “for weeks on YouTube” before ever making their first visit. As a new Christian, he had asked for recommendations for a church home before relocating to Dallas and had received several positive reviews for the church they now attend, but Michael wanted to listen to the lead minister himself before bringing the family for a Sunday visit, confirming that the true gospel was being preached, faithful to the Scriptures. After watching several lessons and classes via YouTube, the family went for a visit and decided shortly after to make their COC their new church home. Michael indicated that with any job transition or relocation, the “biblical soundness of the preacher” has always been the primary focus in choosing a COC. In the spirit of the biblical literacy, Michael emphasized the importance of “context, context, context!”. He noted how many lead ministers within COC can “twist” Scriptures to a more desired reading, rather than teaching honestly with key objectives and truths. Michael said that lead ministers who commit this error, with impure motives or ignorant oversight, do “much harm to COC.” These observations

confirmed Michael's firm position on the importance of a COC having a strong, biblical, lead minister. Without one, Michael and his family would not attend their COC.

Tim defined his lead minister's preaching as "messages confined to the Bible", with words such as "strong" and "scriptural" to strengthen the designations. Tim further commented that he has no interest in hearing a message or Bible class that does not use Scripture as its guide. Tim was appreciative for the lead minister of his new COC because in his former COC, an emphasis on the Bible and its central authority for preaching and practice had been lost. Tim went on to explain that in his previous COC, he did not want to invite friends to church, because he did not know what his friends would hear from the pulpit. At his new COC, he was longing to bring guests, because he knew the preaching would be "predictable" and "consistent." Tim was also impressed that at his new COC, biblical literacy and authority was a commitment throughout the entire church leadership. Bible class attendance was 85% of worship attendance. By Tim's admission, this was an "unusual" statistic which spoke to members' desire to "be in the Word each and every Lord's Day."

Carol noted how biblical preaching can use "outside, contemporary sources as a supplement, but not as a guide." When asked for clarification, she explained that she had heard preaching in the past that would begin with secular writing and then relate it to Scripture, rather than beginning with the inspired text and then seeing what other writers were confirming about the biblical text in today's world. In Carol's estimation, the latter approach was healthier, and a more faithful effort in preaching and biblical study. Carol was more interested in hearing the designation between what the Bible says and what the preacher thinks. When appropriate, Carol said it was good for a preacher to say, "This is my opinion," but it was always best to hear, "The Bible says."

James defined his lead minister's preaching as "teaching which reminds us to follow the Lord's commandments." James explained that he had fallen away from the church at one time in his life, and with his decision to start attending worship services again, he considered several different churches, including churches outside of COC. He noticed that many of churches did not have a strong emphasis on preaching "book, chapter, and verse", or even using the word "commandment." By James' description, much modern-day preaching focuses more on how people should "feel" than on what people should "do." James was drawn to his new church home because of the preaching that emphasized the Lord's commandments and Christians' responsibility to follow them carefully. When asked why James believed his COC was growing numerically, he included an expounded answer. James believed that with the COVID-19 pandemic, many people, himself included, are overcome with fear about the brevity and uncertainty of life. Many are searching for absolute truth in an age of skepticism and doubt. James said that his COC was a place where truth was preached unapologetically, even when it was hard for him (or others) to hear. A commitment to biblical truth brought James incredible comfort, and in his opinion, solidified the numerical growth of his COC.

Challenging

When "new" members explained how the preaching of their new lead minister affected them, it was common to hear descriptions of preaching which encouraged change and expected growth. Remaining in the same place spiritually was highly discouraged. As Peter described at the end of his second epistle, Christians are to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Peter 3:18).

Claire proclaimed that because of her lead minister's commitment to preaching "practical messages that apply to life", she leaves every Sunday "wanting more." Sunday sermons "set her

week up for success.” If she missed the “practical teaching” on Sunday, her week was noticeably more stressful, and less Christ centered. Claire used the phrase, “application, application, application.” For her, understanding how to place biblical teachings into practice was most appealing from her lead minister’s preaching, especially as a new Christian. In addition to the emphasis on practicality, Claire also noted how her lead minister’s preaching encourages her to become a “living sacrifice,” no longer conforming to the pattern of this world, but being transformed by the renewal of her mind (*New International Version, 1978/2011*, Romans 12: 1-2). Claire said that her lead minister’s preaching produces life change and prevents spiritual stagnation in her pursuit of Jesus.

Michael described his lead minister’s preaching as an avenue which exhorted him to “work out your own salvation, with fear and trembling” (*New International Version, 1978/2011*, Philippians 2:12). Michael further explained that the preaching he heard every week at his COC reminded him that living a faithful life was own responsibility and that no one could answer to God on his behalf. His lead minister’s preaching developed personal growth in Michael while also learning more from the Word. Of interest to this researcher was the fact that Michael, a new Christian, substantiated his answer with Scripture, supporting the notion that effective preaching is driven by the text, not by the teacher himself.

Tim said that his new lead minister’s preaching led him to “take action.” This was a significant transformation from his spiritual life of the last ten years which had grown “cold, methodical, and distant.” Tim noted that the preaching of his new lead minister “equipped him to serve in a better way,” pointing to sustainable growth strengthened by a tangible path.

James described his lead minister’s preaching as preaching which “shows me where I need improvement” and preaching which “makes me keenly aware of my shortcomings.” James

also clarified that he was willing to conduct this self-evaluation because of his lead minister's demeanor and disposition as a "kind shepherd" and "strong leader." For James, without these virtuous characteristics, poignant preaching would not have been as readily accepted.

When asked by the researcher why his family chose his new COC, Bill expressed the main driving force as "a strong youth program for our daughter." Like others in the research study, Bill's former COC membership had older adults and young couples with small children, but opportunities for his teenage daughter were noticeably lacking. In this pivotal time in his daughter's life, Bill knew his daughter needed something for her own faith development and spiritual maturation. Bill mentioned other factors that attracted them to their new COC, ranging from "good singing" to "involvement in the community" to "healthy leadership" to their "building used daily" to a "healthy, team spirit among the staff." However, Bill concluded his lists of reasons for choosing his new COC by clarifying that though they were initially drawn to his new COC for the youth program, and encouraged by the other blessings therein, the "excellent preaching motivated them to place membership at their COC." For Bill, it was vital that the entire family be "spiritually fed" by the preaching and teaching of the church, and they had found a place where the family could be shaped into the image of Jesus.

Susan noted that what drew her to her new COC more than anything else was the culture of the church, which she believed was an "extension of the lead minister's preaching." Susan said, "In every sermon, class, and small group, discipleship is the vision." Susan went on to say, "I have never been in a church that talks more about how we can talk to others about Jesus and giving us the tools on how to do it." Susan relocated to the Dallas area within the last couple of years after having lived in South Dakota. As a single woman in a new place, she was searching for a "genuine family" who wanted to "embrace God's mission." She found that place in her new

COC, but according to Susan, these important convictions and identities are intentionally affirmed through the preaching of the lead minister.

Dynamic

Tim noted how most Sundays he watched his grandchildren during worship, which brought constant distractions, but even with his grandchildren begging for attention, he is drawn to the message. Tim noted that it had been “a long time since he had been so interested in hearing the sermon,” but that his new lead minister was a “welcomed change.” The lead minister’s dynamic presentation was coupled by the lead minister’s commitment to Scripture and his involvement with the church.

Michael noted how he came seeking a new COC for his daughter who needed a strong youth program. His former COC was smaller with many elderly couples and young couples with babies, but there was not a strong youth group. Michael was pleased to report that his daughter loved her new youth group, led by a wonderful youth minister and support group of parents. In addition to the youth group, Michael believed his church offered a variety of programs, small group ministries, and opportunities to find and use spiritual gifts for the betterment of the Kingdom. Michael was quick to clarify that these further efforts of the church—programs, small groups, spiritual gifts—were extensions of their lead minister’s preaching which “prioritized community and fellowship within the family of God.”

Claire mentioned how it was common for her COC to have “several baptisms every month” and “new families visiting each week.” Claire attributed these blessings, especially the baptisms, to preaching which emphasized the “making and maturing of disciples” and preaching which “expects a response.”

James previously mentioned the commitment to the preaching of truth as foundational to his own spiritual health and the numerical growth of his COC. James described the preaching of his lead minister as “enjoyable” and “easy to listen to.” James commented on how the courage to preach the truth and the ability to captivate the audience do not have to be diametrically opposed.

Peter described his lead minister’s preaching as having the ability to “enlighten us on the interconnection of Scripture.” When asked by the researcher what Peter meant by his descriptive terminology, Peter explained how his lead minister connects the Old Testament, New Testament, prophets, Jewish history, and Christ’s mission into a “vacuum of understanding.” His lead minister was “more than willing to answer deep questions about theology, translations of the Bible, or arguments about the existence of God and the proof of the resurrection.” For Peter, it was comforting to know that he taught by an “expert.” At the same time, Peter attributed much of his COC’s appeal to youth and children’s ministries. Coupled with the presence of the lead minister, his COC made a tremendous impact in the community and the city.

Terry described his lead minister’s preaching as “energetic and “engaging.” With thankfulness, Terry disclosed that he leaves worship services on Sunday “wanting to make a difference in Kingdom of God.” Terry said his lead minister has “brought new elements which were missing.” When asked by the researcher what “elements had been missing,” Terry mentioned how his new lead minister was willing to “challenge thinking in deciphering between tradition and truth.” He desires to “think in new ways” to address today’s world and challenges. According to Terry, the lead minister has “started new outreach programs and efforts that have made more people want to get involved.” Regrettably, Terry admitted that he has not always felt devoted to the church or Christian principles after leaving worship services or Bible classes at church. In previous COC and with other lead ministers, Terry would quickly “drift off during the

sermons” and simply attend church to “check a box.” Now, in his mid-thirties, Terry understands the need to commit fully to the church. His new lead minister’s preaching and teaching provides the “push” that was lacking in Terry’s life. When asked by the researcher why Terry’s COC was growing, Terry mentioned several factors such as “being a very welcoming church that values deep relationships,” but Terry also asked, “how could our COC not grow without a dynamic preacher like we have now?” For Terry, a talented preacher who also pastors are foundational components for numerical growth in any COC.

Summary of Research Question 5

New members of COC believed that the preaching of their lead minister is critical to the numerical growth of their COC. Certain, and important characteristics of preaching are necessary to connect with membership. Without these attributes, proclamation from the pulpit is senseless noise (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 13: 1).

New members described influential preaching through the following key terms: biblical, challenging, and dynamic. Participants were hesitant to choose a new COC if the preaching from was not built on the Word of God. Without sound doctrine, the teacher and listener are not secure (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4: 16). Additionally, new members seek preaching that will stretch service and deepen understanding of the Lord. When choosing a new COC, new members want to know that they will be stronger with Christ than before. Furthermore, new members want to be mesmerized by the presentation of the lead minister. They desire messages that keep them engaged during the presentation and stimulate their thinking and after the message is over, taking what they heard on Sunday and living it on Monday.

Research Question 6

When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s pastoring, versus other favors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

This open ended research question sought to understand the influence of a lead minister’s pastoring with “new” (placing membership within the last year) members’ decision to make a COC their church home. From the corresponding interview questions of “How would you define the word, ‘pastoral?’”, and “What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith?”, the following themes were continually defined by “new” members who had experienced a transition of church membership: intentional, comforting.

Intentional

Michael described his lead minister’s commitment to speak with every person leaving the auditorium after worship on Sundays. This was a new experience for Michael, especially in such a large congregation. In Michael’s perception, it was an obvious effort by the lead minister to know the people who came to worship and to listen to the messages.

Carol and Tim both mentioned the same event that had a significant impact on their respect for their lead minister. Their COC works hard to put on a massive VBS for the children in their church and their community, especially for a church of their size (approximately 700 members). To bring everything together, it required several weekends of preparing the campus, making decorations, and building props. At every workday session, the lead minister and his wife were present, involved in the work just like any other member. This spoke volumes to Carol and Tim who saw the lead minister’s intentional desire to be “a fervent worker with the church, not just for the church.”

When discussing what was most effective about her lead minister's ministry in her COC, Susan described her lead minister's "emotional intelligence" and ability to connect with people "one-on-one." When asked by the researcher how Susan would define "emotional intelligence" and "one-on-one" interaction, she described her lead minister as a "people person." His preaching is captivating and enriching, but his ability to sit and listen, carry on a conversation, and present a position of care and concern, are among his greatest strengths. Susan stated, "because he cares outside of the pulpit, he is even better inside the pulpit." When push comes to shove, Susan held his personal relationships with the church in higher regard than his preaching and presentations from the pulpit. From welcoming guests to routinely checking in on members, her lead minister is committed to being a minister and shepherd-like figure.

Comforting

Michael described his lead minister's weekly inquiry into how he could pray for Michael, Claire, and his family. This struck Michael as unique, not having a lead minister ask him this question as frequently in other COC Michael has attended. As a Christian of ten years, the offer was special.

Claire explained how in a short time, she had noticed that her lead minister harnessed a deep affection for the church. Through his personal greeting and engagement outside of the walls of the sanctuary, he poised a pastoral presence. For Claire, as a new Christian, this provided a sense of security and love.

Tim described his lead minister's persona as "caretaker" and "caregiver". He explained that a lead minister must be just as devoted to ministry outside of the pulpit as standing in the pulpit. His new lead minister appeared to be someone who possessed a general love for people and a keen interest in their lives.

Carol defined pastoral qualities as “a fatherly figure you want to follow.” She also indicated that these attributes had been missing in her previous COC. In addition to great teaching, the lead minister’s pastoral commitment helped make her COC her new church home. Carol specifically mentioned the passing of her mother within the last year. Since she and her husband were new members, they did not let anyone at the church know of the loss. To their great surprise, on the day of the funeral, a beautiful flower arrangement was sent by the church and four of the elders of the COC were present at the funeral. Carol said it became evident to her and her husband, even as “new” members without a long history of friendships, that this COC was intentional about passing on the comfort which they had received from God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Corinthians 1: 3-4), and that because of that blessing, they knew that they had landed at the right spot.

Bill emphasized a habit of his lead minister that Bill found unusual, but a habit which Bill appreciated. Bill mentioned how whenever his lead minister begins a message from the pulpit, he reminds his audience, “I love you.” Bill stated how this rhythm of deep affection provides security, consistency, and unity, especially when the topic of passage is controversial. When hearing a difficult message, albeit a rebuke or indictment, the church is reminded that the message comes from the lead minister’s care and concern for their souls. Bill indicated that this habit sets his lead minister apart from other lead ministers in his past.

Peter described why, as a young father, he knew his COC was a place where he was “pulled to keep his family.” In addition to the personal commitment of the lead minister to the COC, upon placing membership, Peter’s family was warmly embraced by the church. Their refrigerator was covered with welcome cards and stocked with food cooked by members of the COC. Peter, who grew up in a smaller, more rural COC, was pleasantly surprised by the warm

embrace of a “large, urban COC.” Because of these factors, Peter’s family believed they found their “home.” For Peter, the “preaching is great, but the community is even better.”

Cynthia, a relatively new Christian and new to her COC, gratefully recalled how her lead minister “truly listens to me.” Cynthia further disclosed how her lead minister “has never made her feel like an outsider” but is “down to earth” and “true to his word.” She has noticed that he is committed to “engaging all age groups” in her COC. He listens to the young members’ new ideas without alienating the older members’ concerns. He is a “morale booster” who “provides a sense of belonging.” As someone who could be labeled “young in the faith,” Cynthia declared that her lead minister’s influence is helping her “grow by leaps and bounds.” Cynthia concluded her interview by revealing that when she and her husband speak about their future and potential transitions, from starting a family to purchasing a bigger home or pursuing a promotion at work, every discussion is conditioned upon remaining close to their COC. For Cynthia, and her husband, they have “never been more excited about the future” of their COC, and their lead minister is a significant source for optimism.

Summary of Research Question 6

New members of COC believed that the pastoring of their lead minister is largely connected to spiritual health. The church is called by God to function as a body, rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 12: 26). Lead ministers must plant roots at the center of the “body.”

New members described influential pastoring with two traceable patterns: intentional and comforting. Even in a short time of being exposed to the lead minister’s influence, his pastoral efforts make impressionable effects. New members desire to see the lead minister’s involvement with the congregation outside of the pulpit in a deliberate fashion. He connects with the church

membership body through hospital visitation, weekly conversation, and pastoral counseling. Additionally, new members seek a personality who sympathizes and empathizes with their struggles.

Spontaneous Question

The researcher provided research participants interview questions in advance for participants to have ample time to consider responses. This allowed for participant's meditation and careful analysis of each interview question which strategically corresponded to the research questions. This appropriately complemented the purpose of the study.

At end of each interview, the researcher also asked each participant a spontaneous question they had not expected, with no time for preparation. The researcher sought a natural response.

On a scale from 1-10, with 1 being "not influential at all", and 10 being "highly influential", how would you rate the lead minister's influence on the growth of your COC?

The answers varied, but it was fascinating how participants rated the lead minister's influence on church growth. The overall average rating for lead ministers' influence on church growth among all the participants in the study was 7.8. Male participants provided an average rating of 7.8 for lead ministers' influence on church growth. Female participants provided an average rate of 7.8 for lead ministers' influence on church growth. "Devoted" members provided an average rate of 7.9 for lead ministers' influence on church growth. "New" members provided an average rating of 7.6 for lead ministers' influence on church growth. Based on these ratings, the research confirms the researcher's hypothesis that the influence of a lead minister, both in his preaching and pastoring, plays a significant role in the growth of a COC. Additionally, the lead ministers in these COC preach a minimum of forty-eight of the fifty-two Sundays of the year, roughly 92% of the calendar year. Therefore, respondents' feedback on the lead minister's influence in a COC

is based on hearing the same man's voice and watching the same man's interaction in the COC.

There are not numerous staff to evaluate.

Table 3: Rating of Lead Minister's Influence

Name	Rating of Lead Minister's Influence
Alex	9
Bill	9
Bob	5
Caleb	9
Carl	9
Carol	6
Casandra	8
Claire	8
Cynthia	10
Frank	6
Hayley	8
James	8
Jason	8
Joe	8
John	8
Lisa	5
Lucas	9
Lydia	9
Michael	8
Paul	8
Peter	4

Sarah	10
Sue	7
Susan	7
Terry	8
Thomas	10
Tim	7

Figures:

Overall average rating of lead ministers' influence on church growth: 7.8

Male participants' average rating of lead ministers' influence on church growth: 7.8

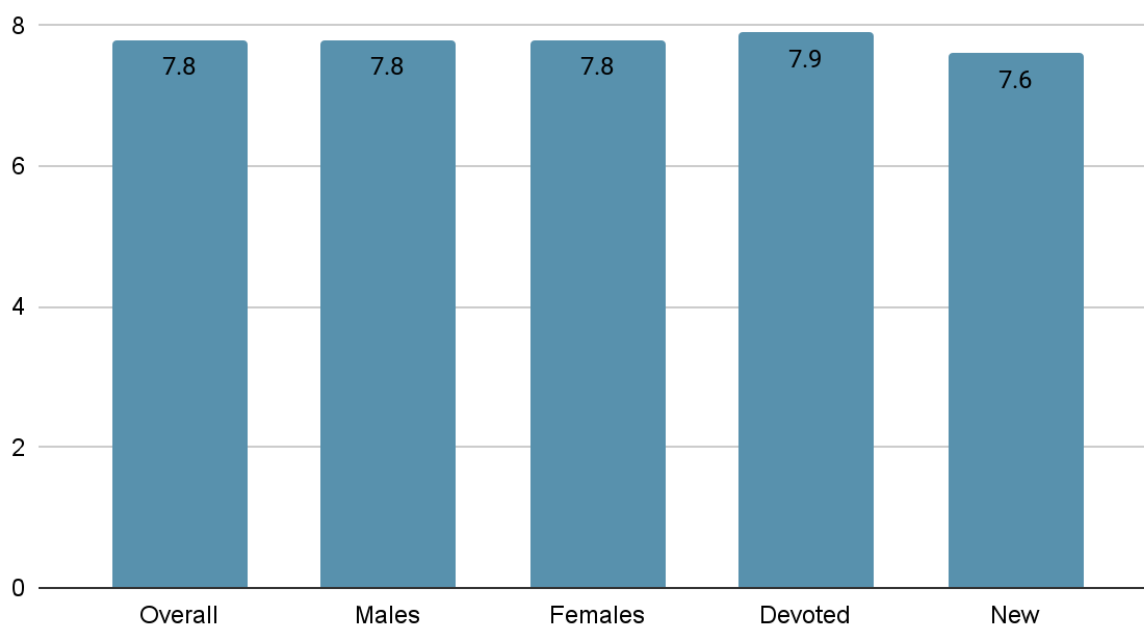
Female participants' average rating of lead ministers' influence on church growth: 7.8

"Devoted" members' average rating of lead ministers' influence on church growth: 7.9

"New" members' average rating of lead ministers' influence on church growth: 7.6

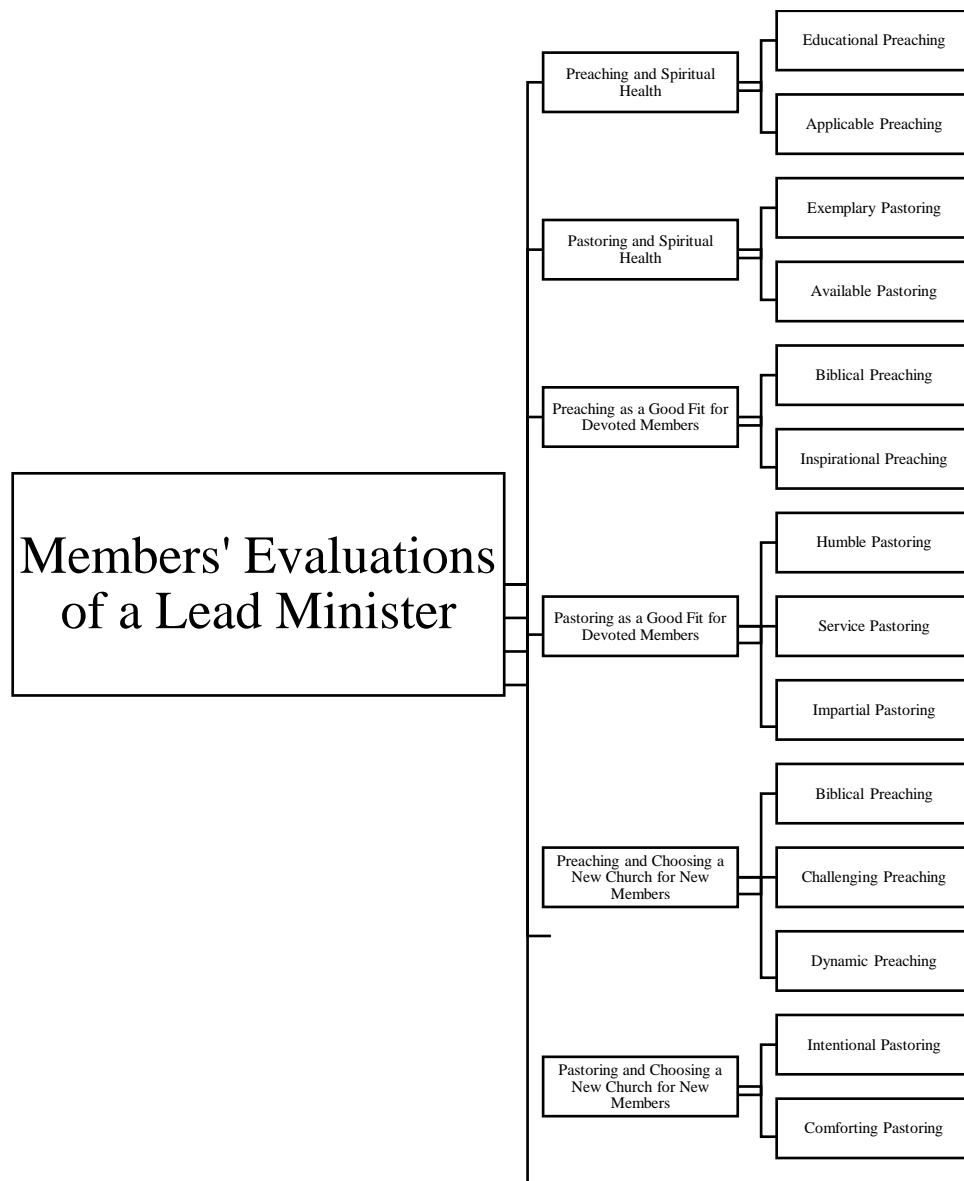
Figure 1: Lead Minister's Influence Averages (By Category)

Lead Minister's Influence Averages (By Category)



The summary of members' evaluations of the lead minister's influence from research questions can be traced through the map below.

Figure 2: Members' Evaluations of a Lead Minister



Evaluation of the Research Design

The semi-structured interviews suitably accomplished the task of diagnosing a potential connection between numerical church growth in weekly attendance and membership and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers in COC in Texas. Research participants offered profound insights from varied experiences as “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” (placing membership within the last year) members. While the COC studied in the project were all established (with an existence of at least twenty years), and of

similar size (at least 250 people in weekly attendance), feedback was diverse and covered a multiplicity of experiences.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Some participants provided thorough explanations while others were more reserved. Unsurprisingly, women participants offered detailed responses while male participants were more direct. At the end of the interview, participants were offered the opportunity to supplement their initial responses with additional feedback or to re-phrase or amend previous responses. Participants were always assured by the researcher that their answers and identities would remain confidential.

Participants reviewing interview questions before the interview supported a natural flow for the interviews. The participants entered the interview sessions prepared with descriptive answers and explanative commentary. There was some overlap between questions which allowed the participants to speak freely about several perceptions of lead ministers, communication, and pastoral effectiveness. When the researcher went deeper by asking what participants meant by certain phrases or terms, participants expounded in meaningful and helpful ways. It was surpassingly evident in every interview that church members hold their relationship to their lead ministers, good or bad, very seriously.

After the opening remarks and greetings, the researcher launched into the interview questions which corresponded with the six research questions of this study. Interview questions one, two, three, and four corresponded with research questions one, three, and five. Interview questions five, six, and seven corresponded with research questions two, four, and six. Naturally, interview questions and research questions brought out similar feedback and connected similar themes. Interview question six could have been utilized in several of the research questions concerning how lead ministers most strengthen the faith of their flock. Interview question seven

could have been attached to any of the research questions asking participants their opinion of why their COC was growing when other COC around the city, state, and country were not.

Interview questions were written with an “open-ended” design. With the “open-ended” emphasis, participants’ feedback was not coerced, manipulated, or coached. Participants’ feedback was raw, authentic, and for some, emotional. These factors bolster the credibility of the research and the process.

Additionally, the commitment to confidentiality and anonymity supported and encouraged the need for openness from the participants and the researcher himself. Participants seemed to enjoy the process of not only considering how they would answer the questions, but why they would answer them the way that they did. Words such as “therapeutic” and “revealing” were often used by participants to describe their experience with the research project. These remarks strengthen the researcher’s conviction in the importance of his research topic and his commitment to being the best minister he can be in his context.

This researcher recognizes that additional questions could have been asked about different ministries of COC such as small groups, outreach efforts, age specific programs, and spiritual formation. These ministries and programs greatly strengthen a church’s appeal, albeit COC or any Christian church, and interview responses from these specific concentrations in interview questions could have potentially provided additional indicators for numerical growth of COC. Additionally, the COC participating in the study were all “traditional” COC in the sense of only observing acapella worship, male spiritual leadership, the essentiality of baptism in salvation, the partaking of the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, and other foundational and historical doctrinal beliefs of COC. Therefore, this study did not consider the connection of the lead ministers and church growth within COC who have incorporated instrumental music, egalitarian

leadership, and other noticeable differences in operational and doctrinal beliefs. Studies of these COC might provide different conclusions.

This study could have benefited by including COC outside of Texas. Even with keeping established histories (a minimum of twenty years in existence) and congregational size (at least 250 people in weekly attendance) consistent, feedback from COC outside of Texas, specifically the “Bible Belt”, could potentially differ in significant ways.

The researcher could have improved the study by lead ministers to supplying a list of thirty to forty names of random participants from who fit the criteria of “devoted” and “new members”, and then researcher randomly selecting from the names. Contrarily, the researcher used all the names provided by the lead minister and interviewed them as is. This did not seem to provide a conflict of interest, or contradict the honesty of the assessment, as participants of both “devoted” and “new” members provided both favorable and negative feedback of the lead minister. However, if this research is continued by another researcher, randomly choosing from a list of provided names could produce additional insights.

Additionally, all participating COC in this study reside in growing, urban locales. It would be interesting to explore if a dynamic lead minister in a rural community generates numerical growth for a COC through his preaching and pastoring. At the same time, it is important to remember that simply residing in a growing geographic location does not guarantee numerical growth. Though all five of the COC in the study reside in growing cities, COC just a few miles from each COC are not growing numerically.

Nevertheless, the researcher believes the research design and methodology appropriately suited the purpose of this study. He was blessed by conducting the interviews and he has

personally grown in his understanding of the effectiveness of lead ministers. He is grateful for this unique and enriching opportunity to conduct research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This chapter formalizes and defines the research study's timely conclusions from interviews, repeating the purpose of the research, while also familiarizing the reader once more with the research questions. Additionally, applications are presented for COC and presumed for evangelical churches as they evaluate the effectiveness of lead ministers. The limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and a closing summary finalize the chapter and the research project.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas.

Research Questions

RQ1. In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the preaching of their lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

RQ2. In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the pastoring of their lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

RQ3. In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the preaching of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

RQ4. In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the pastoring of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

RQ5. When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister's preaching, versus other favors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

RQ6. When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s pastoring, versus other factors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This section details conclusions and findings to the research questions of the study. Theological implications, theoretical implications, research limitations, research applications, recommendations for further research, and research discoveries are included therein.

Research Conclusions

This research study identified that the influence lead ministers within COC, both in preaching and pastoral care, plays a significant role in the numerical growth of COC. Research participants’ lived experiences and feedback supported the phenomenon’s legitimacy. Lead ministers who can teach, inspire, comfort and challenge, through preaching and pastoring, develop beneficial patterns and produce operative systems for strengthening and growing churches.

Participants of “devoted” and “new” members offered picturesque explanations. The following sections unveil summarized descriptions that emerged from the six research questions. Conclusions are designated by italicized responses.

Conclusions for Research Conclusions

Conclusion to RQ1.

In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the preaching of their lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

This foundational inquiry sought to determine the spiritual influence of the proclamation of Holy Scripture. While the emotional and spiritual response to preaching should be accurately categorized as relative, subsequent spiritual rhythms and faithful discipleship patterns are traced

with unique familiarity and consistency. For millennia, powerful proclamation has been viewed by God as his preferential form of divine communication to humanity, and thus, should be viewed as such (Ayer, 1967). There is no indication from any authoritative, biblical source, that this *modus operandi* will change.

The research study identified *educational* preaching as helpful for the spiritual formation of church members. An emphasis on historical and scriptural knowledge, connected to the biblical discussion in context, was highly valued by participants in the study. Church members who have worked long hours and exhausting weeks meeting the demands of their respective professions are not impressed by sermons from compensated lead ministers which seem to be casually assembled and delivered. For research participants like Peter, it is comforting to know that the lead minister possesses knowledge and can offer expert analysis of material beyond the typical church member's experiences. For John, he views lead ministers as professionals who must fulfill the expectation of the responsibility given to them by God and hired by man to accomplish, that of preaching the gospel. For many participants in the study, sermons supplemented by biblical and historical context helped them identify with the people of the Bible. A well-educated lead minister, who transmits educational prowess in a trustworthy and digestible manner, builds credibility to the truth of the message (Allen, 2013). In this researcher's estimation, it is not a coincidence that lead ministers who exude such presence and capabilities often serve growing COC. The dynamics seem to complement each other.

Members of COC, both "devoted" and "new," value adequate preparation and training of lead ministers, attributing much of their personal Bible knowledge to the presentations which flow from the pulpits every week. Transformative teaching provides tangible plans for guidance and growth. While it is ultimately an individual's personal responsibility to progress in their

faith, lead ministers who root spiritual growth in the biblical text uniquely shape the faith and spiritual understanding of churches (Carter, 2005). An effective lead minister ably communicates to both analytical and emotional bandwidths of his audience, bringing scholarly prose and deep, theological concepts, into the simple, digestible terms. In this researcher's opinion, it is a God-given gift which must be exercised with passion and humility.

It becomes profoundly helpful when members of COC believe that their lead minister desires to answer spiritual or biblical questions they may have or struggle to understand. For many research participants, their personal biblical knowledge was less than they desired. In their effort to learn and develop deeper understandings of spiritual truths, the lead minister stands front and center of their experiment.

In urban COC, including the churches in this research study, there are many faces in the audience every Sunday who are not Christians (Yeakley, 2008). Similarly, there are an expected great number unfamiliar with the key convictions and doctrinal beliefs of COC. For congregations with a wide array of guests and backgrounds, it presents exciting opportunities. It also requires skill and temperament to ably address a plethora of personalities.

Biblical preaching with the goal of teaching must rise to the occasion. As Hayley, a participant in the research who did not come to a COC until later in life disclosed, preaching which is biblically centered and "intellectually stimulating" was keenly responsible for the development and formation of her faith. Her previous church experiences had not viewed, or consequently used, the Bible as the sole source of authority for faith and practice. Upon visiting a COC, she developed a strong interest in Bible studies and conversations. For Cynthia, also a new Christian and "new member" for the purposes of the research study, she is making up "lost time"

since she was not raised in COC. Her lead minister provides simple instruction which Cynthia notates in her margins and repeatedly contemplates in her personal devotion.

Conversion stories in COC in the study occurred after some individuals, through the lead minister's preaching, made connections between Old Testament and New Testament teachings they had not previously recognized. A lead minister's emphasis not only to "inform" but to "instruct" makes enormous contributions to the enhancement of faith (Piper, 2018). In the eyes of this researcher, many lead ministers avoid educational sermons because they seem "irrelevant," "dogmatic," or "lethargic." Some lead ministers prefer to make their audience laugh more than learn; cry more than contemplate. This researcher believes that approach to preaching is not only tragic, but dangerous. Jesus, the master storyteller, and expert teacher, sought to instruct. By his own admission, his ministry was centered around teaching and preaching God's truth to mankind (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Mark 1: 38). Preaching is neither "comedy hour" or "motivational speaking," but a divine assignment with eternal implications. Sermon delivery must be treated with dignity and respect.

The research study identified *applicable* preaching as helpful for the spiritual formation of church members. Preaching for the sake of being heard is not effective preaching (Day, 2005). When lead ministers bring the text to life, audiences desire to learn more, submitting under the Lordship of Jesus Christ more fully (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Luke 9:23), more fervently following Jesus than they have in the past (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Thessalonians 4:1). Preaching which does not preach to, and for, life change, is simply distracting noise (Dever, 2013).

Effective preaching is succinctly replicated in daily affairs. Preaching that activates Christian living is preaching that changes lives (Craddock, 2011). Applicable preaching does not

cease after the conclusion of Sunday worship services. For Terry, a “new” member at this COC, his lead minister’s sermons reverberated in his mind throughout the week, reminding him of how, and when, to make the right decisions. Applicable preaching repeatedly challenges hearts, minds, and actions of church members. Even if church members have been Christians for decades, applicable preaching encourages continual affirmation and reconsideration of God’s expectations for his people (Cueva, 2020).

Applicable preaching also supports the lead minister’s connection with the congregation. When the congregation hears the explanation for why the message matters and how it should be lived, the barrier of religious hierarchy separating the pulpit from the pew is removed. The lead minister becomes someone who “understands.” As Frank described in his research interview, applicable preaching makes a lead minister seem less like a “preacher” and more like a “good friend telling you an important story.” Connection encourages the intensity of a church’s desire to listen and learn (Ghorpade, 2012).

The lead minister must be consistent from the sanctuary to the street. He does not sheepishly wear a façade or pretend to be someone he is not. His daily conversations and Sunday homilies are delivered with a unified tone and purpose. This researcher believes that feedback received from this research concerning applicable preaching in COC would be consistent and beneficially revealing for various Christian denominations and communities of faith. Every heart wants to know that a minister practices what he preaches (Farr & Kotan, 2016).

Conclusion to RQ2.

In growing COC, to what extent do members believe the pastoring of their lead minister is connected to their spiritual health?

This second research question is built on the previous research question while simultaneously seeking a strategic dichotomy between the two. The research sought to discern if churches grow numerically from the pastoring of lead ministers. While RQ 1 focuses more on communication styles, RQ 2 highlights personality attributes and rapport with others.

The research study identified *example* as a helpful attribute of the lead minister to the spiritual formation of church members. From “spiritual disciplines” to “congregational involvement”, the church responds to the tenacity and transparency of the lead minister’s leadership. Casandra declared that a lead minister’s commitment to his own faith and Christian practice was most helpful in the strengthening of her faith. Cynthia said that her lead minister was “true to his word,” and therefore, motivated her to listen to every word that flowed from his mouth. If a lead minister’s actions do not match his teaching, a congregation’s desire to listen significantly decreases (Harding, 1982). Jesus described this tension to his disciples concerning the Pharisees thus, “So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Matthew 23: 3). A lead minister being compared to a Pharisee is a tragic simile.

The American public possesses great distaste and significant skepticism to the genuineness and sincerity of organized religion and religious professionals (Barna, 2016). When news cycles report more stories of the lapse of judgment and questionable character of clergy, apprehension toward churches and church leadership only grows. However, when lead ministers prove the genuineness of their faith through honorable lives, manifesting the Holy Spirit by walking in the Spirit’s steps (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Galatians 5:22), the faith of church members, both “devoted” and “new”, increases. In this researcher’s opinion, the strength of COC and the influence of the lead minister cannot be ignored. Even with exceptional

preaching, if a lead minister's personal life is questionable, his impact will always struggle (Keck, 2014).

A lead minister does not have to be "elderly" to be viewed as a mentor. As Bill noted in his interview, his lead minister is a "congregational model" even though his lead minister is nearly twenty years Bill's junior. Decades of living is not a prerequisite to leadership (Harrison, 2018). The apostle Paul exhorted the young preacher Timothy, "Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 1 Timothy 4:12). Truthfully, COC at large need additional lead ministers of younger ages. The pool of veteran lead ministers is quickly shrinking as they transition into retirement or pursue different careers. Without "young preachers" rising to the surface, who can also serve as adequate "mentors," a void will be (and already has been) created of having more pulpits than preachers to fill them. The persona of a "lead minister" might shift, but principles of leadership never change.

The research study identified *available* as a helpful attribute of the lead minister for the spiritual formation of church members. The lead minister cannot be a distant clerical figure in ceremonial robes who struggles to understand the everyman's struggles and who cannot be reached from his ivory tower. He must be a regular member of the family, facing the same temptations, yet divinely tasked with teaching the saints (Bredenhof, 2021).

As many of the research participants indicated, when a lead minister "shows up," it makes immeasurable impact. In her research interview, Casandra told a personal story of her lead minister attending her mother's funeral. Casandra and her husband were still new to the COC. The only reason the lead minister attended the funeral was for Casandra. He did not know Casandra's mother, or Casandra's family. Truthfully, he did not even know Casandra, but when

Cassandra saw her lead minister, she was stunned by his presence. To the date of writing this dissertation, ten years have come and gone since Cassandra's mother passed away, but Cassandra remembers her lead minister's presence like it was yesterday. As Cassandra understandably noted, "It meant more to us than any sermon he could ever preach."

The lead minister's presence is not limited to Cassandra's experiences. He must be a shepherd-like figure who guides and cares for the members (McGuiggan, 1996). He makes inconvenient hospital visits and schedules last-minute counseling sessions even when they do not accommodate his personal schedule. Unexpectedly, he knocks on the door to visit and pray with new members. He develops healthy rhythms for "checking-in" with members he has not recently seen, not to inquire for the reasoning for their absence, but to communicate his love and care for their soul. In everything, he intentionally sacrifices for the flock. He is viewed, and consequently respected, not simply as teacher and instructor, but servant and shepherd, because ministers cannot fully minister if their responsibilities and desires do not extend beyond the pulpit and into the lives of people (Darling, 2019). Without these attributes, a lead minister's influence will decrease, both with "devoted" and "new" members. A lead minister must maintain physical and emotional boundaries to prevent the appearance of inappropriate behavior, and to guard against spiritual burnout, but his personal commitment to the church must never be questioned by the indifference of his activity.

Conclusion to RQ3.

In growing COC, to what extent do "devoted" (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the preaching of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

This research question sought to understand the hearts and minds of those who had planted deep roots in their COC for an extended period. As “devoted” members, they had also committed to the work and ministry of their COC. With the turning of calendars, perceptions morph and expand. In listening to the lived experiences of “devoted” members as they described preaching that was a good “fit” for their COC, the designations *biblical* and *inspirational* repeatedly rose to the surface.

The research study identified *biblical* as an important description of preaching for “devoted” members. Messages from the pulpit must be rooted in the inspired text, and repeatedly returned to the Bible for credible authority. Many of the research participants applauded their lead ministers for clarifying the difference between “fact” and “opinion” and “truth” and “tradition.” Frank noted how his lead minister often declare, “I love to hear those Bible pages turn.” Biblical preaching is doctrinally sound and divinely accurate (Kuruvilla, 2019). It passes the “noble Berean” standard (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 17:11) of church members. Lead ministers should desire for their churches to scrutinize and evaluate their preaching based on its adherence to the teachings of Scripture.

In a post-modern world and a post-Christian America, belief in “absolute” truth is intellectually dense and morally deficient (Barna, 2016). Individuals are encouraged by self-centered, politically motivated skeptics, to discover their own way and define their own truths. If this decrepit decline of society is not closely monitored, it will decisively poison the church (Kyle, 2017). Jesus admonished his followers to be in the world, but not of the world (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 17:16), and James, the brother of Jesus, equated friendship with the world with spiritual adultery (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 4:10). Lead ministers, however, are tasked with an eternal, awesome task. They are to remind

their churches that they speak on behalf of God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 4: 1-2); as his spokesman, they do not communicate a manmade or human driven message, but ancient words from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Peter 1: 20-21). As followers of Jesus, they are to strive to live up to the calling they have received (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Ephesians 4:1). They are to pattern their lives by God's word, which is truth (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 17: 7). Lead ministers speak with no other prerogative and from no other manual.

When lead ministers ground teaching and preaching in sources other than Scripture, problems abound (Proctor, 1992). COC do not need to hear what their lead minister thinks about every issue or cultural debate of the day, nor should they be doubly interested or invested in his personal interpretations. COC must hear what God thinks and what God expects for those who have been washed and purified by the blood of Christ. The word of God is the power for preaching. Human authors can provide helpful supplementation for a lead minister's sermon preparation, but Holy Scripture is the message that must be centrally delivered and obediently accepted as the words of God.

The research study identified *inspirational* as an important description of effective preaching for "devoted" members. Inspirational preaching does not leave the listener searching for the main point of the message, but it is delivered in everyday prose, easy to digest. Paul asked the church at Colossae to pray for his preaching to be clear, easily understood, and tangibly applicable. (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Colossians 4: 3-4).

Inspirational preaching flows from voice and vein, captivating listeners. It communicates a lead minister's commitment to the message. It encourages life change and provides the tools necessary to improve. It is not afraid to "prod" or "rebuke" to move faith along the continuum of

progress, as church members, both “devoted” and “new”, “grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Peter 3:18).

There have been many “inspirational” speakers and speeches throughout history. Americans remember President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s heartfelt address to the nation days following the ruthless attack on Pearl Harbor when he pleaded with Congress to declare an act of war against the empire of Japan. The phrase, “A Day which will live in infamy” has been eternally sketched into history books. The world remembers the heartfelt speech of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, inspiring thousands with the exultation, “I have a dream!” These speeches changed history, but as powerful as these speeches were, they lacked the most inspiring wind in their sails. These messages did not flow from the Word of God. When a lead minister steps into the pulpit, speaking on behalf of Almighty God, his words which are powered by God’s grace, can rescue a soul from the abyss and bring them into the Kingdom of light (Piper, 2018). Preaching is not a task that can, or should be, taken lightly.

Inspirational preaching does not require answers to every question. For John, what was most “inspiring” was his lead minister admitting ignorance on an issue but promising his commitment to search for an answer. The quest for truth and the desire for growth can be just as inspiring as the message from the pulpit. A lead minister must respect the “secret things of God” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Deuteronomy 29:29) and submit to the truth that God’s ways are higher than man’s ways, and God’s thoughts are higher than man’s thoughts (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Isaiah 55: 8-9).

Conclusion to RQ4.

In growing COC, to what extent do “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) members perceive the pastoring of the lead minister to be a good fit for their congregation?

Like RQ3, this research question sought the lived experiences of “devoted” members, but with a different periscope. “Devoted” members with months and years of potential membership, were uniquely exposed to the pastoral nature and habits of the lead minister. How did the lead minister’s pastoring affect their spiritual journey, and were his pastoral patterns congruent with the specific needs of their COC? In observing responses to this question, designations of *humble*, *servant*, and *impartial* were frequently repeated.

The research study identified *humble* as an important description of pastoring for “devoted” members. For Lisa, she felt most connected to her lead minister when he sought to identify more as a “member” than as a “minister”. She was drawn to his desire to sacrifice and prioritize equality more than authority, a leadership style reflects Jesus Christ who “did not consider equality with God something he grasped, but made himself nothing” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Philippians 2:7). Humble leaders are open, caring, and approachable (Harrison, 2018). It is easy for pastoral visitation, counseling, and spiritual direction to be pushed to the back burner of ministry, living in the shadows of the public affirmation of the pulpit, but if a lead minister intentionally makes himself available to the church for shepherding, it is quickly noticed and continually appreciated.

The research study identified *servant* as an important description of pastoring for “devoted” members. Servant leaders see ministry concerns and locate pastoral care needs through their own initiatives. They willingly insert themselves into troubling situations and the messiness of life. For Tim and Carol, a husband and wife, a strong factor in making their COC

their new church home was the lead minister and his wife decorating the COC campus for VBS. They were present for workdays, community outreach activities, and fellowship meals for the church. In their previous COC experiences, the lead minister and his family were seldom present. For Carol especially, this was disheartening. She questioned if the lead minister practiced what he preached or expected from the church. Contrarily, their new lead minister is committed to giving his time and energy outside of the pulpit for the strength and betterment of the COC. This calculated leadership, expressed through kindhearted servanthood, spoke volumes to Tim, Carol, and their family.

Similarly, Paul said of his lead minister's congregational influence, "he is effective inside the pulpit because of what he does outside of the pulpit." Paul readily admitted that he would not be drawn to listen to his lead minister's messages on Sundays if his lead minister was not actively serving the congregation and his own family Mondays through Saturdays. This was not to indicate that Paul believed his lead minister was ineffective in the pulpit, but his ministry outside of the pulpit strengthened his ability therein.

Cassandra, a member of the same church as Paul, reminisced with tears of her lead minister's presence at her mother's funeral. His presence convinced Cassandra, and her husband, Carl, that the COC they were visiting needed to become their church "home." The church was a family, led by the familial lead minister.

The research study identified *impartial* as an important description of pastoring for "devoted" members. Impartial lead ministers strive to connect with everyone. Bob, Sue, Thomas, and Sarah, all members of the same COC, observed the intentional effort of their lead minister to greet as many people as possible on a Sunday, rotating among the exit doors of their large auditorium. Even with a congregation of over 700 members, the lead minister did not want to be

accused of “having favorites” and “only associating with a select few.” This effort by the lead made an impressionable impact on several different couples. Perception becomes people’s reality (Farr & Kotan, 2016). Lead ministers who pattern their lives after God will not show favoritism, just as God does not show favoritism (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 2:11) Rather, they long to minister to the entire church body.

Conclusion to RQ5.

When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s preaching, versus other favors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

This question aimed at the heart of making a potential connection between church growth and the lead minister of a COC. As individuals, couples, or families selected a new COC, what role did the lead minister play in that decision-making process? Specifically, how involved was his effectiveness in the pulpit? With this central question, revealing descriptions were repeatedly disclosed such as *biblical, challenging, and dynamic*.

The research study identified *biblical* as an important description of preaching for “new” members. The importance of biblical preaching from “new” members was equally as passionate as that of “devoted” members, offering similar descriptions for “biblical” preaching. For Bob, Sue, Bill, Lucas, Hayley, and Tim, the preaching of their lead minister was the “biggest reason” they chose their COC as their new church home. However, all these research participants clarified that what their lead minister preached was more important than how he preached. Rephrased, his content trumped his style.

Commitment to biblical authority and sound doctrine are foundational to effective preaching (Craddock, 2011). This researcher found this evaluation to be encouraging. Some have

suggested that for churches to grow in a postmodern society, preaching which demands a response, prioritizes repentance, and carries an occasional rebuke, will not be accepted, or valued (Rainer, 2011). However, research data from this project speaks to the contrary. For the participants in this study, preaching which magnified the exclusivity of Jesus, the written will of God, and the expectation of sanctified living, was preaching that grows churches.

For participants in this study, they were searching for a lead minister who boldly defines right and wrong. This should not be surprising, as this preaching method was modeled by the prophets of old, John the Baptist, and Jesus. It pointed to the need for forgiveness and demanded a life change. It was not meant to “soothe”, but to “spur” (Lee, 2009).

The research study identified *challenging* as an important description of preaching for “new” members. Sometimes the “challenge” was a fresh interpretation of a passage or a different insight into a biblical truth. For Hayley, she was most impressed by her lead minister’s willingness to preach sermons and engage with topics that were “outside the normal doors of faith” in hopes to “recapture them with the Word of God.” For Whitney, relatively new to COC, challenging preaching was essential for her remaining at her current congregation. Surface level preaching that does not stretch her mind and spirit, she would not feel obligated to stay. For Caleb, challenging preaching forced him to “get out of his comfort zone” and seek new ways to glorify God. Preaching which does not challenge appeals to no one (Cardo & Gallagher, 2021).

The research study identified *dynamic* as an important description of preaching for “new” members. Like “challenging” preaching, “dynamic” preaching motivates church members to realign their lives under the authority of God, demanding an emotional response when appropriate, as the apostle Paul described, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (*New International Version*,

1978/2011, 2 Corinthians 7:10). When discussing “dynamic” preaching, new members did not feel bored through the presentation. Bill spoke of “looking forward to the message” all week while Sue, a new member of a different COC said that she could “listen to him” for hours. In learning of Sue’s history with COC, this was a strong statement, as she confessed to being dreadfully bored in the COC of her youth and coming close to walking away from faith. Sue described the preaching of her former lead minister as “cold” while the preaching of her new lead minister is “comforting”, “welcoming”, and “informative.” Her new COC, coupled by the influence of her new lead minister, reignited the flame of her faith. The lead minister holds her attention and makes her want to study more in personal devotion.

Conclusion to RQ6.

When “new” (placing membership within the last year) members choose a new COC, to what extent is the decision uniquely tied to the lead minister’s pastoring, versus other favors (ministries, Bible classes, programs, etc.) of the church?

Of the six research questions built into this research project, this question was the hardest to measure, due to the shortage of history. A “new” member who has placed membership within the last year may not have been afforded the opportunity to develop educated opinions of the lead minister’s pastoral aptness. They can listen to preaching, and thus critique presentations, but the lead minister may not have yet ministered to their family. Nevertheless, the answers which were supplied provided notable and helpful feedback for the purposes of this research project. Two descriptions repeatedly returned through respondents’ replies: *intentional* and *comforting*.

The research study identified *intentional* as an important description of pastoring for “new” members. Even without a lengthy relationship, a lead minister can make a pastoral impression by noticing his surroundings and being aware of people’s circumstances. By being a

good life listener, with emotional intelligence, he can discern when a shepherd's touch is needed. Hayley praised her lead minister for doing more listening than talking. This discipline is required to make strong connections with people. James, the apostle, would exhort his audience, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry" (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 1:20). Lead ministers who follow this inspired protocol develop prominent influence with their congregations.

The research study identified *comforting* as an important description of pastoring for "devoted" members. A sense of belonging feeds church growth (Darling, 2019). Lead ministers should create this mood and atmosphere among newcomers, frequently communicating to new members that they are needed, and that the church is not the same when they are gone. Lucas acknowledged that even though his lead minister was an "outstanding preacher," his pastoral abilities had a "slight edge" on the influence of his sermons. Jason indicated that his lead minister's willingness to meet with members at the spur of a moment meant more than any sermon he preached. Joe said that weekly lunches with his lead minister "did more for his faith than anything else." Peter said that knowing his lead minister "would listen to him about anything" connected him to his lead minister more than the sermons he heard. For Bill, his lead minister reminded every person gathered before every sermon that he [lead minister] loved them. Any truth presented by the lead minister came from a place of deep affection and admiration for his congregation. People will long remember what someone does more than what they say, and ministers cannot escape this virtuous rule (Dever, 2013).

This world is full of bullies who long to suppress and discourage the success of others. One does not have to search long for a loud voice yearning to break one's spirit. Contrarily, the church must be a family that sincerely desires every member's success, transformed more into the

likeness of Christ. Connection in churches is more important now than it has ever been before (Harlaonu, 2020).

Research Implications

COC must understand that biblical preaching is imperative for the numerical and spiritual growth of their congregations. Members of this study, both “devoted” (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” (placing membership within the last year), admired preaching that accurately explained the will of God and appreciated preaching that drew them closer to the heart of God. While most of the participants admitted that they could tolerate preaching that was not always “dynamic” or “inspirational”, they readily clarified that they would have zero tolerance for preaching which was not doctrinally sound. False teaching would immediately warrant their departure and their search for a new church home. The value of a lead minister who correctly handles the word of truth (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, 2 Timothy 2:15) cannot be overstated or overrated. For some participants, the biblical soundness of their lead minister’s preaching was their main motivation for choosing and remaining in a COC.

Additionally, lead ministers in COC must recognize that their connection to the membership outside of the pulpit is equally as important as their connection to the membership inside the pulpit for the numerical and spiritual growth of their COC. For some participants in the study, knowing that the lead minister was their friend, mentor, or exemplified colleague, held more significance in their evaluation of the lead minister than his preaching capabilities. Various members participating in the study recalled how lead ministers attended funerals or visited hospitals decades before. These acts of service do not go unnoticed, and they are certainly never forgotten. When the pastoral nature of ministry is strategically positioned front and center in a lead minister’s life, his approval rating remains strong, and he is endeared to the membership.

Research Applications

Elderships in COC, responsible for the employment and oversight of lead ministers (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 20:28), must scrutinize the doctrine taught by their lead ministers. Elderships cannot ignore the temporary conflict or eternal gravity of the situation when the lead minister does not faithfully teach or preach the whole counsel of God. If false teaching from the lead minister occurs, elderships will be held responsible for the error. If a lead minister is not speaking the word of truth (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 17:17), he must be immediately relieved of his duties before apostasy consumes the church. Beyond the spiritual consequences of false teaching, elderships will potentially watch their membership deplete as congregants seek new church homes where the Bible is faithfully taught and valued.

If lead ministers fail to devote as much emphasis and energy to their pastoring as they do their preaching, their influence, and possibly their tenure, will be short lived. People want to know how much someone cares before they care how much someone knows. An unexpected prayer in a hospital room, unplanned counseling session, or unannounced home visit can cover a multitude of shallow and dull sermons. When the lead minister seeks to be a shepherd as well as a spokesman, his effectiveness soars.

Research Limitations

This study focused on five COC in Texas that have been in existence for at least twenty years with a minimum of 250 people in weekly attendance. Furthermore, the study limited interviews to “devoted” members (attending worship services at least twice a month) and “new” members (placing membership within the last year). The parameters of this study capture a large gamut of COC settings, especially in Texas (Yeakley, 2008). Nevertheless, some limitations exist that must be acknowledged.

This study did not account for COC outside of Texas. While biblical convictions remain consistent across state lines within COC, the study does not report for geographical, socio-economic, or personality differences. A lead minister may not be as prominent or influential in churches of different settings or locale.

This study did not focus on churches with less than 250 worshippers in weekly attendance. In small, rural COC, there is often only one paid minister on staff. In theory, this should exponentially increase his influence, but this assumption is not proven through the data.

This study was limited to four to six families at five different COC in Texas, but data was saturated before the four to six family thresholds. In total, twenty-seven research participants were interviewed for this study. Expanding the population to either more families or more churches could potentially offer additional perceptions that speak to the phenomenon at hand. This study initially committed to four to six families of five churches to allow adequate time to truly listen to stories and perceptions in interviews rather than expedited quantitative surveys.

This study was limited to the lived experiences and perceptions of “devoted” members and “new” members selected by the lead minister in each COC. Due to privacy concerns, COC do not release membership records to nonmembers. Therefore, the lead minister selected families to be interviewed who met the criteria of “devoted” and “new” members.

Unfortunately, it was difficult for the researcher to find more than five numerically growing COC in Texas, substantiated by church records, that fit the congregational criteria for the study (minimum twenty-year history and 250 people in weekly attendance). Even with a limited research scope, this does not offer glowing reviews for COC in Texas at the present time, legitimizing to a greater level the dire need for this project. COC and its leadership must study

and consider the significance of the influence of lead ministers, and role lead ministers play in church growth.

Further Research

This study does not provide an exhaustive treatise of church growth. Additional research should be conducted outside of the immediate parameters for COC of this study and across varied groupings, sizes, and denominations within evangelical churches in America. Every church that professes the name of Jesus should be concerned about church growth for the benefit and future of the Kingdom of God.

This researcher believes it would be beneficial to study COC under the 250 weekly attendance thresholds. COC of this size represents an astounding number of COC in Texas (Yeakley, 2008). This statistic is surprisingly consistent with most churches and denominations in America, as most churches are 150 members or less (Barna, 2016).

Furthermore, this researcher believes it would be notable to study COC outside of Texas. “Bible Belt” states such as Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama would likely report similar findings and discoveries, but COC in the Midwest, Northwest, or the Northeast might offer conflicting data. This researcher chose to focus on the state of Texas because he has served churches professionally in Texas throughout his career. This scope, however, does not demote or denounce the voices of COC in different geographical locales.

Additionally, this researcher believes it would be helpful to conduct a study of this nature for various Christian denominations and community churches. Of particular interest, how different leadership structures such as synods or councils affect the freedom, flexibility, and influence of lead ministers (or pastors), consequently affecting numerical church growth. COC

are responsible for the hiring and termination of their own ministry staff, without any obligation for approval or explanation to any governing board.

From a human resource perspective, this researcher believes it would be advantageous to conduct research on the best hiring practices for churches, defining what church leadership and governing boards should be considering and searching for when they partner with a lead minister. Still, administering the interview process, investigating his past, and the numerous implications supplied therein for his future.

Finally, this researcher believes it would be wise to conduct further research on methods for training lead ministers. Since lead ministers are uniquely connected to church growth within COC in Texas, it would stand to reason that churches, Christian universities, and spiritual communities should invest much time and resources into developing the future with effective and dynamic lead ministers. The apostle Paul asked the prevalent questions to the church at Rome, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Romans 10: 14-15) These questions are just as critical today for COC.

Chapter Summary

This study concluded that the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers holds significant importance for numerical church growth within COC in Texas. A lead minister’s ability to captivate with his words and minister through his heart generates congregational commitment to a COC. Even if an individual has not worshipped at a COC for extended duration (for the purposes of this study, a “new member”), the lead minister’s influence takes root in positive or negative manifestations. If lead ministers in COC desire for their congregations to thrive,

numerically and spiritually, they should continually hone their craft of preaching and deepen their pastoring to the flock. When COC are fed a balanced diet from the pulpit and cared for outside the sanctuary, a lead minister's influence flourishes.

It would behoove elderships in COC to meticulously consider their hiring and firing practices for ministry staff. The apostle Paul charged the elders in the Ephesian church with the task of shepherding the flock and being guardians of souls (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Acts 20:28). To fulfill these God-given duties, grounded in eternal implications, elderships within COC must scrupulously evaluate the character, ability, and effectiveness of the lead ministers they employ. A COC might offer excellent programs, youth ministries, Bible classes, and small groups, but without strong preaching and pastoring from the lead minister, a COC will struggle to witness numerical growth and maintain sizeable membership.

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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

June 22, 2023

Jacob Hawk
James Wood

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1540 The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth
Within Churches of Christ in Texas

Dear Jacob Hawk, James Wood,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2. (ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

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

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

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

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

at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the Project: *The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth Within Churches of Christ in Texas*

Principal Investigator: Jacob Hawk; Doctoral Candidate; John W. Rawlings School of Divinity; Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a “devoted member” (attending worship services at least twice a month) or “new member” (placing membership within the last year) of a growing Church of Christ in Texas with a minimum weekly attendance of 250 people who has been in existence for at least twenty years.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study will be to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. Church attendance of all churches in America, including COC, has been declining for decades. How much can, or should, the downward cycle of COC be attributed to lead ministers?

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Participate in an interview through video conferencing software that will take no more than one hour.
2. Answer open-ended questions about your perceptions of the preaching and pastoring of your lead minister. Your answers will be transcribed, remain confidential, and stored on the researcher’s personal computer.
3. Review your answers (“member-checking”) to the interview questions to ensure their accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researchers will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After seven years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for seven years/until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher and his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Jacob Hawk. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. James Wood, at [REDACTED].

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

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

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX C
PERMISSION REQUEST

Dear _____,

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Christian Leadership. The title of my research project is *The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth Within Churches of Christ in Texas* and the purpose of my research is to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. Church attendance of churches in America, including COC, has been declining for decades. How much can, or should, the downward cycle of COC be attributed to lead ministers?

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

Participants will be asked to participate in a one-hour maximum video conferencing interview to answer open ended questions concerning their experiences with the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. The data will be used to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth and the lead minister. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Jacob Hawk
Minister, Prestoncrest Church of Christ

APPENDIX D
PERMISSION LETTER

[Date]

[Official's Name]

[Lead Minister

[_____ Church of Christ]

[_____, Texas]

Dear Jacob Hawk,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled *The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth Within Churches of Christ in Texas*, I have decided to grant you permission to access our membership list and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- I will provide our membership list to Jacob Hawk, and Jacob Hawk may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in his research study.
- The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.
- We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[Official's Name]

[Lead Minister]

[_____ Church of Christ]

APPENDIX E
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the John Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Christian Leadership. The purpose of my research is to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, attend a Church of Christ in Texas that has been in existence for at least twenty years with at least 250 people in weekly attendance, and must be either a “devoted member” (attending worship services at least twice a month) or a “new member” (placing membership within the last year). Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio and video-recorded interview through video conferencing software. It should take approximately one hour to complete this procedure. Participants will review their answers (via “member-checking”) to the interview questions to ensure their accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but pseudonyms will be used to protect participants’ identities.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED]. If you meet the eligibility criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Jacob Hawk
Minister, Prestoncrest Church of Christ

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

APPENDIX F
VERBAL RECRUITMENT

Hello _____

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Christian Leadership. The title of my research project is *The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth Within Churches of Christ in Texas*, and the purpose of my research is to explore if a potential connection exists between church growth trends and the preaching and pastoring of lead ministers within five established Churches of Christ (COC) in Texas. Church attendance of churches in America, including COC, has been declining for decades. How much can, or should, the downward cycle of COC be attributed to lead ministers? If you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and a “devoted member” (attending worship services at least twice a month) or a “new member” (placing membership within the last year) of a growing Church of Christ in Texas with a minimum weekly attendance of 250 people that has been in existence for at least twenty years. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio and video-recorded interview via video conferencing software and answer various open-ended questions about their perceptions of the preaching and pastoring of their lead minister. This procedure will take approximately one hour. I will also ask participants to review their answers (via “member-checking”) to the interview questions to ensure their accuracy. Answers will be transcribed, remain confidential, and will be stored and backed up on the researcher’s personal computer. Names and other identifying information will be collected as part of the study, but pseudonyms will be used to protect a participant’s identity.

Would you like to participate?

Yes: Great, do you mind answering a few screening questions? If you meet the eligibility criteria, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

No: I understand. Thank you for your time.

A consent document will be emailed to you for you to sign, scan, and email back to me.

Do you have any questions?

APPENDIX G
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth Within Churches of Christ in Texas
Jacob D. Hawk

Open-Ended Interview Questions:

- 1) What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)
- 2) How would you define an “inspirational message?” (Cueva, 2020)
- 3) How would you define an “educational message?” (Newton, 2020)
- 4) How would you define a “scriptural message?” (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)
- 5) How would you define the word “pastoral”? (Bredenhof, 2021)
- 6) What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996, Smith, 2019)
- 7) Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)

APPENDIX H
SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

The Connection of the Pulpit and Church Growth Within Churches of Christ in Texas
Jacob D. Hawk

Open-Ended Interview Questions:

- 1) What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)
- 2) How would you define an “inspirational message?” (Cueva, 2020)
- 3) How would you define an “educational message?” (Newton, 2020)
- 4) How would you define a “scriptural message?” (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)
- 5) How would you define the word “pastoral?” (Bredenhof, 2021)
- 6) What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996, Smith, 2019)
- 7) Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)

Questions below are based on RQ1

- 1-1 What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)
- 1-2 How would you define an “inspirational message” (Cueva, 2020)
- 1-3 How would you define an “educational message?” (Newton, 2020)
- 1-4 How would you define a “scriptural message?” (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)

Questions below are based on RQ2

- 2-1 How would you define the word “pastoral”? (Bredenhof, 2021)
- 2-2 What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996, Smith, 2019)

2-3 Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)

Questions below are based on RQ3

3-1 What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)

3-2 How would you define an “inspirational message”? (Cueva, 2020)

3-3 How would you define an “educational message”? (Newton, 2020)

3-4 How would you define a “scriptural message”? (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)

Questions below are based on RQ4

4-1 How would you define the word “pastoral”? (Bredenhof, 2021)

4-2 What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996, Smith, 2019)

4-3 Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)

Questions below are based on RQ5

5-1 What is it like to listen to your lead minister? (Cox, 2012)

5-2 How would you define an “inspirational message”? (Cueva, 2020)

5-3 How would you define an “educational message”? (Newton, 2020)

5-4 How would you define a “scriptural message”? (Vines & Shaddix, 2017)

Questions below are based on RQ6

6-1 How would you define the word “pastoral”? (Bredenhof, 2021)

6-2 What do lead ministers do to make you feel the strongest in your faith? (Keck, 2014; McGuiggan, 1996, Smith, 2019)

6-3 Why do you believe that your COC is growing when others are not? (Woolever & Bruce, 2012)