

A Study Guide for Small Membership Church Survival: Participating in God's Mission

by

Hun Ju Lee

Date: 4/6/2021

Approved



Dr. Lacey Warner, Supervisor



Dr. William H Willimon, D. Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of
Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

2021

ABSTRACT

A Study Guide for Small Membership Church Survival: Participating in God's Mission

by

Hun Ju Lee

Date: 4/6/2021

Approved



Dr. Lacey Warner, Supervisor



Dr. William H Willimon, D. Min. Director

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

2021

Copyright by
Hun Ju Lee
2021

Abstract

Small membership churches are struggling with the very real issue of their continued survival. However, there is no wealth of information nor work addressing the issues of small membership churches. The purpose of this thesis is to devise a vehicle by which I can analyze and interpret issues of survival as they are lived out in the local church setting. This thesis will explore the biblical and theological basis for parish ministry by using *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*. It will assess the role of the small membership church, explore several different denominational approaches to the issue of church survival, provide a study guide, and analyze a process that I am developing for the three small churches I served. This thesis will be beneficial in exposing the state of the small membership church and the hidden dynamics that shape them. This thesis will be the beginning of a road map for the small membership church seeking to survive to participate in God's Mission.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my church families, who have allowed me the time to complete this work. I dedicate this work to my beloved wife, Hye Shin, two precious children, Brian and Grace, my parents, and my parents-in-law. Without their support, sacrifice, and patience, I would not have completed this project. And, I dedicate it to Small Membership Churches and their pastors.

Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Introduction.....	1
1. Statement of Problem and Purpose	1
2. Statement of limitation.....	4
3. Statement of Methodology.....	5
Chapter 1. Understanding of Parish Ministry	8
1. Purpose of Parish Ministry.....	8
2. The Primary Task of Parish Ministry.....	12
3. The Biblical and Theological basis for Parish Ministry.....	15
4. The United Methodist Understanding of the Small Membership Church and Congregational Development	21
Chapter 2. Developing the Study Guide	30
1. The Role of the Small Membership Church	30
1.1 Lyle Schaller	34
1.2 Carl Dudley	36
1.3 Paul Madsen.....	37
2. Approaches to church survival.....	41
2.1 The Church Information Form.....	43
2.2 God’s People at Work in the Parish	45
2.3 Study on Parish Ministry	47
2.4 Administration in the small membership church and guidelines for the small membership church.....	49
2.5 The Church Vitalization Readiness checklist	49
Chapter 3. Description and Application of Study Guide	51
1. The role of the parish religious interview	51
2. The Study Guide Progress – Can our small membership church continue to survive?	56
2.1 History	56
2.2 The Background.....	60
2.3 How this project is set up.....	63
2.4 Leadership for this project study.....	65
2.5 How to get started	65
2.6 Related Information	67

2.7 The realities of the study guide	69
Chapter 4. Evaluation and Implication	74
1. Evaluation of the process in each church setting	74
1.1 The Avondale church and Chatham church Experience	74
1.2 The Landenberg Church Experience.....	82
2. The Implication for the future in each local church.....	87
Conclusion	92
Appendix A.....	101
Session 1 Knowing who we are	107
Session 2 Knowing what we are doing	112
Session 3 How we do what we do.....	115
Session 4 Our relationship to the larger community	119
Session 5 Stating what we are going to do.....	122
Session 6 Deciding on what we want to do now.....	126
Evaluation of the Study Guide	130
Appendix B	132
Bibliography	134
Biography.....	137

Introduction

1. Statement of Problem and Purpose

What are the primary causes of the decline in membership currently being experienced by the United Methodist Church? What are the most significant challenges facing the Church? The main problem found within the United Methodist Church today is a dramatic decline in numbers. According to the most recent data from *Good News Magazine* (Nov 20, 2015), “The United Methodist Church has lost 116,063 members in the past 12 months - the stark equivalent to losing a 318-member local church every day of the year.” The decline has become common in membership and attendance during recent years. Small membership churches are struggling with the very real issue of their continued survival.

For a small church, like a person with cancer, the longer the reality of the disease is denied, the harder the inevitable end can be to accept. However, finding any specific information relating to the definition and understanding of the United Methodist Church toward small membership churches was a long and disappointing search. Most pastoral seminars and seminary classes contain the success stories of churches or pastors' so-called successes, with the context of large churches in the background. Understanding and resourcing small membership churches is needed.

My interest begins with a question over the issue of the small church's future: “can our small membership church continue to survive?” This project has grown out of the struggle we have been involved in for these past three years. My intention in this thesis is to develop a study guide by which I can analyze and interpret the issues of survival as they are lived out in the local church setting.

I develop a six-week study guide by which the three local churches I served could specifically address the issue of their continual survival. This study is self-explanatory about a church, its program, and its ministry. This study guide can provide a framework by which the small membership church could begin to ask questions about its particular existence in an objective light. The purpose of this study guide is to point to ways in which the church can be equipped to make its ministry and mission more faithful and effective. As Paul Madsen describes, "The small church has no different mission than any other church of the land, regardless of size. It may use different methods to achieve that mission, but the mission of proclamation, fellowship, ministry, and service is the same for all."¹ This study guide can help them look at the issues of what God's plan is for them or what their own actions/inactions are doing to affect the church's life. Perhaps then the reader can use my experiences and realizations as a springboard to understand the issue of church survival. It is my hope and prayer that pastors might begin their own pilgrimage on the way to understanding, long before the only issue facing them and their churches is "to close, or not to close." Anticipating churches' options before they must decide to close is the understanding behind the question of whether a small membership church can decide.

Our individual and corporate struggles are aptly captured in many magazine articles. Normally I might have given a passing glance to such articles. Perhaps I would have responded with mild disinterest at best. However, the urgency of this dilemma hit me straight on because across the page from it was another article on a church in trouble.

¹ Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1975), 61.

It concerned a struggling church of which I was all too aware, and yet, after all the months spent discussing and formulating a plan to heighten awareness of my church plight, I would imagine seeing my church story in print. As Robert Dale describes, “if a church has goals, they usually fall into one of two categories; survival (self-preservation and self-propulsion) or mission (God’s redemptive purpose and Kingdom focus).”² Without intentionality, the default goal of my three churches is now survival.

In 1984, the General Conference adopted an ambitious goal of having “20 million new members at the end of two quadrennia.”³ There has been much written about this of late as Annual Conferences through their respective episcopal offices ask the local church to set individual goals for church and Sunday School for the next year. Much is being proposed as to how monies can be raised across the denomination to fund new churches in new settings. Yet, I approach the issue from another point of view.

As Lyle Schaller pointed out in his article in “Circuit Rider,” we have lost nearly two million members. He goes on to point out that “at least 5,000 local churches have closed or disappeared via merger.”⁴ Critics of the General Conference plan generally agree that each passing day means a loss of another 318 people from our membership rolls. Rather than build new churches, why can't the General Church build up the local churches we already have to begin to stem this exodus? The question remains for us to answer, "what about these churches?" How did things get to the point indicated by this article? Why had nothing been done long before it reached this stage? Where were the

² Robert Dale, *To Dream Again* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), 63-65.

³ Journal of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1984, 445.
https://archive.org/stream/journalbaltimore01unit/journalbaltimore01unit_djvu.txt

⁴ Richard B. Wilke, “Who’s Minding the Store?”, *Circuit Rider*, May 1986, 6.

leaders of the Church, and what was their position in all of this? In light of the two articles, especially the one ultimately pertaining to all three of my churches, the question becomes even more urgent.

2. Statement of limitation

Small can be thought of in many ways. When we say that the church is small, it can mean that the church building is small. It may mean that the church's financial capacity is small, the church's vision is small, or the ministry of the church is small. However, in this thesis, the concept is based on the number of church members and the number of attendees for Sunday service.

Although this thesis addresses issues relative to small membership churches, it will not discuss dynamics of change and leadership, comparison between small and large churches, the distinctive values and advantages of the small membership church, conflict management and/or resolution, the role of the pastor, or specific styles of pastoral leadership.

This thesis is not a workbook merely about how to kickstart a church from death to life. It is not a book on turnaround strategies for the growth of small membership church. This is not a case of effective strategies, as if to say, “here is how to do it.” Rather it is a review of various issues I have experienced and provide a tool for small membership church to have assurance for fulfilling God’s plan regardless of its size. My intention is to limit the field to those resources that more clearly dealt with the issue I found the three churches confronting. The works included in the chapters are intended as a resource to be supplemented and enlarged by other contributions to this issue. I look at

the issues of small membership churches through the eyes of the United Methodist Church and the denominational structure that I am familiar with. Thus, this thesis limits itself to the United Methodist Church.

3. Statement of Methodology

This project is divided into four chapters, each of which focuses on a different aspect in the life of these local churches as it relates to the issue of survival. It should be noted that in pursuing this question, one is not merely seeking a yes or no answer. Rather, as one explores the many changing aspects of addressing small churches' survival, one will discover how God has been active in these people's lives and their particular church ministry. The end result is a deeper appreciation for the viability of a church's ministry and how it is so defined in a particular setting.

Chapter one is entitled "Understanding of Parish Ministry." It explores the presuppositions behind many of the questions with which I challenged the good people of my three churches. I will spell out here my basic convictions about what the church was created and called to be and how it exists in our world. Then, this chapter will take a look at "The United Methodist Understanding of the Small membership church and Congregational Development." Here I will describe how my denomination approaches the issue of size and determines its expectations for its small membership churches. The one major line of thought concerning this is referred to as "congregational development". It is my intention to overview this particular understanding as it relates to the small membership church.

Chapter two will review "The Role of the Small Membership Church." This chapter will highlight the issue of the continued survival of the small membership church and how it might best understand itself. I will also take a look at how a church determines the success of its efforts. Then I will piece together several different denominational approaches to this issue of church survival. This will include attention to a process that was beginning to be developed in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. The particular emphasis in this chapter will be on those materials that more directly relate to this issue of survival.

Chapters three and four deal with the particular process that I developed and used in each of the three churches I serve. This section begins with an overview of the three congregations. Certainly, as the project will show, each of the churches came to a different answer to that very difficult question, "Can our small membership church continue to survive?" The basic pattern was two-fold. It involved my working with small groups in each setting and also going out and talking to each and every one of my members. Through my interview form, I gathered invaluable insights and observations that helped the large groups as our work progressed. Lastly, I will deal with "The Implication for the Future" in each local church. This will deal with the reality of what was uncovered in each setting.

In conclusion, I will share my very candid thoughts and reactions to this whole experiment – the research, the assumptions, and hypotheses with which I worked, how findings bore or failed to bear these out, the methodology, and what was learned from it. The project will reflect all that has occurred for the last ten-months in the life of the three churches.

There is no question that the good people of these churches put their lives and their faith on the line as they came to the point where they are today in their struggle. Tomorrow it could all very well change. After all, what in our life is ever static? And when one considers the church, I think it doubly so.

Chapter 1. Understanding of Parish Ministry

1. Purpose of Parish Ministry

The church, according to *The Articles of Religion of the United Methodist Church*, is a “visible congregation of faithful people in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance...”⁵ This understanding was put together with that of “Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church” in 1968, which stated:

“We believe the Christian church is the community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. We believe it is one, holy, apostolic and catholic. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by men divinely called, and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world.”⁶

The present-day United Methodist Church has a tradition that traces its understanding of existence as a church to that of a “covenant community.” This is evident in Scripture in Genesis (18:18; 22:18), where it is written that God offered the chosen people the blessings of providence and commanded of them obedience to the divine will and way. Through them all the world shall be called blessed. In the new covenant of Christ, yet another community of hope was called out and gathered up, with the same promise and condition renewed that all who believe and obey shall be saved and made ministers of Christ’s righteousness.⁷

⁵ The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church, July 03, 2019, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/articles-of-religion>

⁶ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 73.

⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 95.

It was through John Wesley that this stressed theme of covenant-making and covenant-keeping was made a part of our understanding of the Christian experience. Citing the example of the Gospel of the new covenant, he emphasized a “new” bias for reconciliation – justification by faith and birth into a new life in the Spirit. Wesley identified this growth as being “a marked growth toward wholeness” which today is understood to mean “going on toward perfection.”⁸

It would follow then that the “heart” of ministry in this understanding is realized in the ministry of outreach that Christ exemplified. Certainly “its object of loyalty and faith” marks the “uniqueness” of the call to discipleship.⁹ Mark’s gospel account of “The Call of the Four” would very much be in step with this (Mark 1:16-20).

The Book of Discipline affirms: “Christian ministry is the expression of the mind and mission of Christ by a community of Christians that demonstrates a common life of gratitude and devotion, witness and service, celebration and discipleship.”¹⁰ In a very general sense then, the community can be defined as “a body of persons who share some measure of common life, and a common loyalty.”¹¹ Thus the purpose of ministry in the church would be to share with others the love that God first shared with us, and Christ commanded us to continue sharing (I. Cor. 9:6; Acts 8:14; 15:36-40). What the Christian shares ultimately is the gospel. The meaning of this term has been quite clear since the time of the early church. For one to refer to the “gospel” is to refer to “the message about

⁸ Thomas Langford, *Practical Divinity*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 39.

⁹ James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 13.

¹⁰ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 97.

¹¹ James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 1.

the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ through which the living Lord offers salvation to those who believe.”¹²

There is also an implied sense of responsibility for this general ministry of the church. It is stated that the people of God “must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced.”¹³ In sum, the reality that underlies the Wesleyan understanding of the church is that either the church is faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it is not faithful, in which case it “loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world.”¹⁴

As one considers the questions raised in the study guide, one discovers the meaning of the church for a particular group of persons in a community. However, there stands against tradition and denomination, or particular religious stance, the biblical and theological witness. The discussion now turns to my understanding of how the church is involved in ministry. This is clearly understood through Scripture, tradition, and my own particular reasoning and experience.

The church carries out its ministry as it interprets and relates the Christian faith to the life situation of individuals, communities, and societies.¹⁵ By assisting people in their role as worshipers to become more fully human, the church enables “members of society in their role as citizens to engage with the real human needs of their community.”¹⁶

¹² Neill Q. Hamilton, *Recovery of the Protestant Adventure*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 120.

¹³ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 98.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁵ The terms “church,” “local church,” and “congregation” all have the same implied meaning in my project. They are used to designate a group of people who live or participate in the same community, share similar religious beliefs, and are intentionally organized as a social institution for the purpose of pursuing the goals and participating in the rites and activities associated with their religion. The term “Church” (capitalized), except when modified by a denominational title, refers to the mystical body of persons of all ages and of all denominations who have used the name “Christian.”

In each generation and each place, the church has had to redefine its reason for being, reexamine its fundamental purpose, understand the culture and concerns of its constituency, and work out an understanding for accomplishing its task. An essential part of this reflection and examination has had to do with understanding all of these concerns in light of what the Bible teaches as it speaks the Word of God. When it succeeds in its task, people's lives are enriched along with the society of which they are apart. When it fails, the church becomes weak and disintegrates, and the community of society with it.

Part of the responsibility of the church is to examine the issue of loyalty, especially in terms of commitment:

“The Christian community consists of those who are loyal to Jesus Christ as the constituting person and event of Christian history. Christians believe in him; they bring life under the interpretation of the meaning of this person. They have an obligation to the community because of this declared loyalty.”¹⁷

It is within the bounds of the local church to develop an awareness, or process, to enable it to utilize continuously its understanding of God and his activity in the world, as well as knowledge about its social context in making decisions about the church's role in relating people to God. Each local church, with its self-defined or pre-determined parish, usually without conscious awareness of the theological implications, makes decisions about its role and acts upon them – many of them each year. The crucial question is, does the church make the decisions deliberately, thoughtfully, intentionally, in such a way that it does not lose sight of the totality and wholeness of its task in a particular setting? Are later decisions made in the same spirit of understanding as earlier ones and on the basis of

¹⁶ Bruce Reed, *The Task of the Church and the Role of Its Members*, (London: The Grubb Institute, 1975), 24.

¹⁷ James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 12.

theology with a foundation in Apostolic Christianity? It does not seem enough that decisions lead to action; they must be grounded in the church's primary task. An adequate conception of the church's purpose is not sufficient; it must take into account the place of Christ in the sum of it as well as the nature of the Church in terms of ministry and authority.

2. The Primary Task of Parish Ministry

The "primary task" of the Church is best understood as meaning to receive people as they are, enable them to submit their lives in dependence upon the incarnate Christ through faith, and then return to their community renewed and strengthened for participation in other local church and community involvement as the living embodiment of Christian love and action. The Church must understand the character and tasks of other groups and institutions in society, how it interrelates with them and with each other, and the limits of its own responsibility to itself and others.

The purpose of this beginning point in my project is to suggest the components of such a theology of ministry. My intention is to propose a model for local churches that have the opportunity and responsibility of the individual components as they provide boundaries and a sense of definition for the church's function and presence in society today. I will first outline these components so as to give a brief overview of my understandings.

The subject matter of the church is Jesus Christ, the world, and the needs of society. Religion thus becomes the subject heading by which one lives, learns, and grows in the knowledge of the saving grace won for all people by Christ through his gospel of

love. It is because of the world and society that the church exists. As the Book of Discipline states:

“It is primarily at the level of the local church that the church encounters the world. The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society. It is the function of the local church to minister to the needs of persons in the community where the church is located, to provide appropriate training and nurture to all age groups, cultural groups, racial groups, ethnic groups, and groups with handicapping conditions, to cooperate in ministry with other local churches and to participate in the worldwide mission of the church, as minimal expectation of an authentic church.”¹⁸

The Church must understand the purpose and scope of religion, its function in society, and the nature and diversity of people’s religious quests. It must be able to keep this learned understanding in perspective as the church attempts to reach out through teaching and witness to others. In a sense, the church must be willing to proceed slowly in terms of making changes in the attitudes and actions of members until such time that the church has gained the confidence and trust of the people it wishes to influence.

Within the tradition of the United Methodist Church, one finds the framework of change and influence within the context of “Church Membership.” To be a member, one “is to be a servant of Christ on a mission in the local and worldwide community.”¹⁹ As the church has gained the confidence and trust of the people, it in turn calls and receives them and then empowers them to go back out into the world. The purpose of this two-fold:

“Each member is called upon to be a witness for Christ in the world, a light and leaven in society, and a reconciler in a culture of conflict. Each member is to identify with the agony and suffering of the world and to radiate and exemplify the Christ of hope.”²⁰

¹⁸ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 147.

¹⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 158.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

The content of the Church's concern with religion is the Christian faith. Each Church has to work out its understanding of the faith through the interpretation of God's revelation in the Hebrew tradition, the life and teachings of Christ, the significance of his death, and the testimony of the Apostles, the early church, and the faithful throughout Christian history.

The Church must understand the nature and task of the Christian Church and local congregations to be clear about its own identity and purpose. It must recognize and fulfill its role as a fellowship of believers organized as both a social institution as well as a faith community – as a participant in the ageless and universal company of the redeemed and in the social system of a specific community at a given time.

In the particular setting of time and space, the Church must seek to understand the ultimate concerns of its people and relate those concerns to the ultimacy and dependability of God; that is, it must correlate people's needs and God's answer.

As it carries out its correlating and catalytic function – “the primary task” – the Church performs multiple services and become involved in diverse activities. It must be vigilant that it does not lose sight of its primary task or elevate the services and activities from strategies to goals that are desirable in themselves.

The end of the Church's efforts is the fulfillment of human lives and the creation of a society in which love and justice are predominant. Today, perhaps more than ever before, the Church must take a stand and actively promote the nature of peace and peacemaking as it seeks to fulfill its biblical mandate to love in and through Jesus Christ. The Church must continually evaluate its ministry lest it becomes a closed system – operating apart from the world.

The success of the Church is not measured, and its faithfulness cannot be evaluated by institutional criteria. This is the crux of the struggle when one seeks to determine whether a church can survive with a viable ministry of its own. The result is that it must measure its “success” by the quality of lives redeemed and the characteristics of the social milieu in which those lives are lived.

3. The biblical and theological basis for Parish Ministry

The issue of the continued survival of a Church community is not just a recent phenomenon. In his gospel, Mark faced a similar agenda for his community. As he was concerned that the early Christian community could be united and strong, he knew that this could only be made possible if the people were united in their common faith. Clearly, he saw that if sin and evil were prevalent in the people’s lives, it would be that much easier for divisions and splinter factions to grow.

Mark intended to sound a warning against this possibility as he related this parable of Jesus:

“How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin.” (Mark 3:23b-29 NRSV)

In the midst of the Church’s struggle to come to terms with what exactly it means to be a Christian today, and in turn understand the church’s relation in a community to the primary task, the word that comes to us from Mark has strong implications. His

community, faced with an uncertain future except for the certainty of continued persecution, was forced to look back into history to discover its past. This was done to find a similar situation, which might have been related to their own time, to help them understand the scope of it all.

In this situation, Jesus was intent upon proving that exorcism was the only alternative open to him. The essence of exorcism was the exorcist calling to his aid some stronger power to drive out the weaker demon. So, Jesus says, “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” (Mark 3:24-25 NRSV)

The focus of Jesus’ teaching is that he accepts life as a struggle between the power of evil and the power of God. He did not waste his time in speculating about problems to which there are no answers. “He did not stop to argue about where evil came from, but he did deal with it most effectively. One of the church’s ironies is that we spend a good deal of time discussing the origin of evil, but we spend less time working out practical methods for tackling the problem,” William Barclay writes.²¹ For example, if a person awakes to find his house on fire, he does not sit down to read about how a fire is caused. He grabs such defenses as he can manage and deals with the fire firsthand. “Jesus saw the essential struggle between good and evil which is at the heart of life and raging in the world. He did not speculate about it; he dealt with it and gave others the power to overcome evil and do the right.”²² In other words, he gave people the power and will to

²¹ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), CD edition, Mark 3.

²² Ibid.

survive in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, his only criterion that of having faith in God.

As I consider the biblical and theological basis by which a person can deal with the question of a community's identity and purpose, I first thought that Mark's word would set the agenda. The truth that can be gleaned from Mark is that "when culture threatens the people of God, the apocalyptic perspective will help you survive."²³ The particular emphasis that Mark relates is that one should keep focused on the world and not withdraw from the world.

In our society today, there exists a strong, almost innate, desire to equate everything that our nation does with a part of the coming kingdom of God. This was not too different from the situation that Mark addressed. For example, in the United States, I particularly see this evidence in my congregations where the last presidential election is viewed as "an affirmation from God" that "might makes right." Moreover, the success of the military in any endeavor is viewed as confirmation of God's blessing. This carries even into our church life where any success we have as a congregation is viewed as our being in God's good favor. The problem is that when we consider the church's fight to survive, this present logic is noticeably absent.

The tension that would exist from this word in Mark is that Christians are called to resist this misuse of the Gospel, even at the point of persecution, so that their community might promote the true meaning of the gospel. For Mark, the figure of Christ is totally non-political. Christ cannot be identified with one particular nation or

²³ Neil Q. Hamilton, *Recovery of the Protestant Adventure*, (New York: Seabury, 1981), 1.

community—save that of a Christian one. The mission of the people of God is to the whole world—and not just one part of it.

The “saving” word that is ours to hear, and the one that desperately needs to be heard, is that our efforts must have to do with Christ and must not reinforce our culture’s misuse of him. Christ surely transcends any national interest and his call is to resist attempts by society to place a particular emphasis or slant on him that is prejudiced to its own existence.

There is a contradiction in terms of our expectations of Jesus as the Christ. In short, what we are dealing with is the reality of two different sets of expectations about the Messiah. One wanted a charismatic holy warrior who would come at the advent of the holy war to end all wars; the other wanted Jesus to come as the Son of Man in the clouds when the time was imminent.

What we are left with is not what perhaps society as a whole would want. If one were to live only as society dictated, I fear we would not be any better off than the crowds that followed Jesus at a distance. However, we, who are members of the local church, have something more that is left with us. In the case of our United Methodist Church, we have “a connectional society of persons who have professed their faith in Christ, have been baptized, have assumed the vows of membership.... and are associated in fellowship as a local United Methodist Church so that they may hear the Word of God, receive the sacraments, and carry forward the work which Christ has committed to his Church.”²⁴ This certainly provides us with an option far greater than that of merely choosing to live as society dictates.

²⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 148.

The tension over the issue of the continued survival of the small membership church, when it comes to deciding the “right” answer, is one of the church community stressing unity. The church must decide that what it does is a part of God’s plan rather than focus on the division in the Kingdom advocated by others. The point is made so that the church community’s focus is on the issues of the church and not of the community. There must be a sense of this unity as a people of God if the appeal is made of God for direction and guidance for future survival.

When one considers the options open to the church, let the lesson from Mark be clear. If society dictates that the church remains open, for example, because one would hate to see the building empty, but yet not consider the question of mission—then it would seem that we are guilty of the very thing Mark advocates against. The point is the need to examine the nature of the mission of the church and to see how that stand up against the unity of the people toward God.

In the course of my past twelve years’ experience as a pastor, I have developed an appreciation for the unique theologies that exist not only within the United Methodist Church as a whole, but within the annual conference, districts, and certainly, the local churches. In the case of one whose roots were in the Seoul metropolitan area in South Korea, and whose ministry thus far has been in suburban New Jersey and rural Pennsylvania, the following realization has come clear. I have seen that where one comes from geographically is not as important as where one is coming from theologically.

Inherent in the questions the people ask about life in any of those church communities that I have served are the ones relative to myself as a pastor and a co-believer in the faith. Am I saved? Do I know Christ as my personal savior? Is the Holy

Spirit present in my life of prayer and devotion? Do I practice what I preach? Do I become what I profess when I affirm that “I believe in God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit?”

Certainly, the only way these and other questions can be answered is through the passage of time and personal interaction. Here is where I see the need for the church to pause continually to re-examine the community it finds itself in, re-interpret the faith that the people find themselves living, and discover new ways to share the story with others who have not yet heard it, or who have fallen away from the fellowship community. If we are accurate in tracing our spiritual genealogy to Jesus,²⁵ then the primary task of the church is as vital and valid today as it was yesterday. We have a tradition of passing on faith stories to succeeding generations, which then becomes the rationale for pastoral presence in the life of a church community. As I understand it, this calls me to be present in the homes, the gathering places, and the workplaces (where possible) to share who I am with my parishioners.

The theological task which faces the local congregation and its surrounding community is complex and ongoing, but quite possible if it is given the appropriate pastoral oversight, leadership, and caring. The church cannot afford to lose sight of it nor become bogged down in non-church related dynamics—nor can the pastor—even though these often interrupt the work of church ministry. Here I refer to outside dynamics unrelated to the church, which are brought into the church setting. An agenda is introduced that in reality has nothing to do with a particular church matter at hand. I experienced this most closely as people took out their frustrations at the farm economy

²⁵ Matthew 1:1-17 (NRSV) and Luke 3:23-38 (NRSV)

and government subsidies of crops at Church Council meetings. Where normally it would be a moot point to buy new shades for the nursery (to replace the torn ones), it now becomes a major decision.

It would seem that as long as both the people and the church are willing to acknowledge the context and shape of its theology, the church can, at least idealistically, step back from the many conflicting and competing theological and interpersonal dynamics and processes it experiences. Once this stepping back occurs, there can be an opportunity to clarify its understanding of the mission and ministry Christ calls it to be about, re-think its understanding of the faith as it has come down to it through the Wesleyan quadrilateral (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience), and then re-study the needs of the particular church community. Here is an opportunity for the church community to wrestle with the nature of frustrations that occur as a part of life and relate these to one's faith development.

With such an outlook, the church can operate and function effectively and, yes, confidently, even in the midst of its search for wisdom. This would be done while still seeking to understand God's word better in the present predicament. As the church understands its primary task and goes about its ministry, it will be better equipped to send its members back into the world with a measure of resolve and certainty, filled with faith, hope, and love. They will be able to face all that life has to confront them with, without losing sight of the presence of God in their lives nor of the new life won by Christ.

4. The United Methodist Understanding of the Small Membership Church and Congregational Development

“So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:41-42 NRSV)

It is commonly understood by most, if not all, that the beginning of the church is Pentecost. The debate continues from this point as to what it is that constitutes the church and, thereby, by what criteria one defines the church. For argument’s sake, I follow the classic United Methodist understanding of the church and define it from that stance.

“A local church is a community of true believers under the lordship of Christ. It is the redemptive fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.”²⁶

The history of the United Methodist Church is very much tied in with the life of John Wesley and his followers. The history of the church’s beginnings in American history, also, is of vital concern. What is important for our discussion here is not the merits of that development, but rather the understanding that, although Wesley did not intend to start a new church, nevertheless he did. The particular emphasis of the new church in the early days was its use of small group ministry. “Wesley organized people into small groups, significantly shaping the spread of the Methodist movement and the retention of new Christians,” Kevin Watson writes.²⁷

The purpose of these societies would be, in the words of Leon O. Hynson, to “reform the nation and the church and to spread scriptural holiness across the land.”²⁸ It was from the early church portrayed in Acts 2-4 that Wesley formulated his ideal church.

²⁶ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 147.

²⁷ Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*, (Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014), 22.

²⁸ Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation*, (Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1984), 129.

Yet, he was aware of the presence of evil and knew that the church would have to contend with it. Thus, he set about to fashion a church that would one day demonstrate the marks of love, purity, and unity. It is this end that the present church today still seeks to realize in her actions, ministries, and social concerns.

Perhaps the one constant all this time has been the persistence of change. In work commissioned for the eve of the American Methodist Bicentennial, Sheldon Duecker observes: “Both society and the United Methodist Church are changing. Tension has been building around the structure and governance of the United Methodist Church.”²⁹ An important term to understand here is that of connection. It describes the special relationship that exists between all the many and varied parts of the United Methodist Church. Its origin can be traced back to Wesley, who described the early movement’s preachers as “those in connection with us.”³⁰ The General Conference of 1816 began to refer to the “church” and the “community,” rather than the connection. Today the use of the term connection is not well understood. It is perhaps the one remaining tie that has permitted the United Methodist Church to maintain its individuality and separate identity in the face of survival or growth.

Trying to find any specific information relating to the definition and understanding of the denomination of the small membership church was a long and disappointing search. This was especially so when one considered that my perspective was the church of less than 100 members. There is no wealth of information nor work

²⁹ R. Sheldon Duecker, *Tensions in the Connection*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 13.

³⁰ R. Sheldon Duecker, *Tensions in the Connection*, 17.

being addressed to the issues surrounding this particular type of small membership church. It is thus my purpose in this chapter to piece together what I have uncovered.

The *1996 Book of Discipline* makes one, indirect reference to small membership churches. Surprisingly, there is no reference to small membership churches in the *2016 Book of Discipline*.

This reference is in the section entitled “Local Church Property” contained in Paragraph 2550:

“In static and declining population areas, churches of fifty members or less shall study, under the leadership of the district superintendent, the District Board of Church Location and Building, and the appropriate conference agency, their potential in the area to determine how they shall continue to develop cooperative patterns with other congregations or give special attention to relocation.”³¹

I must, at this point, express what I suspect is my presupposition in the writing of this chapter. That is that the flow of information across the church is poor at best. The report is a good case in point. Here was compiled a complete listing of the current resources and contact persons within the denomination’s scope. It would have provided an excellent back-drop from which to illuminate this important topic at a conference council meeting. It would have been a good resource for our local conference committee on the small church to pass along to the very persons involved in the struggles. Yet it was sent to the top of the organization, and in the case of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conferences, never delivered or even mentioned to any of us in small membership churches. In terms of the role of the denomination, Jackson Carroll describes that “often the denomination is perceived as orienting its programs and resources to the larger and more substantial churches. There is truth in this perception; many denominational

³¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1996*, 650.

resources assume an organizational structure and level of sophistication found more typically in larger churches, and inadequate attention is given to translating programs to smaller situations.”³² Gray L. McIntosh adds that “for church leaders to be effective they must understand that churches have different needs depending on size. A small church is not just a miniature version of a large church but an entirely different entity.”³³

In a visit I made in 2019 to the General Board of Global Ministries Washington, D.C., this was the impression I was given as I searched for information relating to the small membership church and what the denomination was doing to get in touch with it or its struggles. I fear the answer given of “not much!” was more real than I first wanted to believe. How could a denomination that has roughly 24,600 SMC’s (out of 32,000)³⁴ turn its ear on such a large majority? Had we grown so large that our attention to organization exceeded that of concern for its smaller, yet no less important, churches? These and related questions were to become the framework for my explorations.

Robert Wilson, in his work, *Shaping the Congregation*, raises an issue that relates to this very point. He sees the United Methodist church as “distinctive in Western Church history.”³⁵ He identifies the issues of continued survival and viability of ministry appropriate to my church settings:

“As the United Methodist Church will soon enter its third century, it finds itself in a period of severe institutional crisis. In the decade following the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren merger, 1969-1978, the denomination declined

³² Jackson W. Carroll, *Small Churches Are Beautiful*, (Sanfrancoscp: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 166.

³³ Gary L. McIntosh, *One Size Doesn’t Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church* (Grand Rapids, Fleming H. Revell, 1999), 19.

³⁴ According to a 2014 report to the General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) and the Connectional Table, “Of the approximately 32,100 local UM churches in the U.S., 76 percent (24,654) average less than 100 in attendance, and nearly 70 percent (16,909) of those actually average less than 50 on Sunday morning”.

³⁵ Robert L. Wilson, *Shaping the Congregation*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 11.

by 11%. This represents a loss of 1,217,977 members. During this period, the number of organized local churches decreased by over 2,068 or 5%.

The seriousness of this situation can be dramatized by noting that every week during that entire decade, the United Methodist church lost an average of 2,342 members and closed four local churches. To put it another way, if the denomination continues to lose members at the same rate, it will not be around to begin the fourth century; it will have gone out of existence early in the last quarter of its third century.”³⁶

To address the immediate questions of how to stem this decline also calls for reaffirming who, what, and why we are. It calls into account our understanding of our primary task as well as what our understanding of mission is. Apart from the more practical dilemmas of survival and continued existence, one runs smack into the mandate we have to be the church in Book of Discipline:

“The people of God are the Church made visible in the world. It is they who must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced. There can be no evasion or delegation of this responsibility; the Church is either faithful as a witnessing and serving community, or it loses its vitality and its impact on an unbelieving world.”³⁷

Currently, these matters are pursued under the general heading of “Congregational Development.” To search through the Book of Discipline in hopes of finding this would prove fruitful. On the General and Annual conference levels, there should be the establishment of committees to explore this issue. But in a conversation with Bishop Johnson recently (Episcopal leader of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference), she felt that in our area, the only process that would work would be one initiated by a local church congregation. There was no planned program available in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference in the present nor any planned for the future. Perhaps the

³⁶ Robert L. Wilson, *Shaping the Congregation*, 14-15

³⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 98.

following is all that a local church might need to pursue its own forward journey into the unknown future: “Local Churches, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may enhance their witness to one another and to the world by showing forth the love of Jesus Christ through forms of mutual cooperation.”³⁸

If one were to look for a specific program on the General Church level, one would encounter the term “Cooperative Parish Ministry.” This certainly would be one of the “forms of mutual cooperation” referred to above. In essence, the key is intentionality in terms of how each church approaches the process with the other. There are presently no guidelines, nor any likely from the General Church Boards in the near future. The crux of their dilemma is how much to suggest and via what format.

From my experience, it is difficult for one to suggest the need to pursue a process or plan to reformat the ministry of a congregation. For some, relocation or closure is a negative step in a church’s life. However, though this may be a difficult and even puzzling time in the life of the local church, such a negative attitude need not prevail. Reformatting, including a merger, can be a positive step toward a fulfilled ministry. The question should not be “where have we failed,” but “where are the benefits to Christ and the world to come?” What is the best way to organize ourselves to do the ministry of Christ?

Another way to understand this process then is to see it as a step in developing a format called Cooperative Parish Ministry. *The Book of Discipline* was quite clear in its emphasis on the need to strengthen the local church congregation in every way possible. This includes calling congregations to come together in ministry in many ways.

³⁸ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 149

Frequently, congregations seek out a new ministry format because they feel themselves running short of “critical mass” in either number of persons, or in dollars, to carry out their desired mission. It seems that a certain bulk of these resources is necessary before ministry can proceed.

In other cases, the congregation reformats out of an inner choice to be with others in whatever ministry comes forth. Thus, cooperative parish ministry, including merged congregations, may be a movement from strength to greater strength for the ministry of Christ. I will later show how this can be so, as well as how, in the case of Avondale Church and Chatham church, reformatting failed. In any case, for a local church to consider re-formatting to survive and maintain viability in ministry and mission, it needs to be a conscious commitment relying on the best judgment of the congregation, the pastor, the Cabinet, and the General Agencies of the denomination.

The United Methodist Church launched the Vital Congregations initiative in 2011. In an effort to increase church vitality, the UMC identified five key drivers of vitality: small groups and programs, lay leadership, mission, worship service, and the pastor.³⁹ In Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, there was begun in 2012 a group of persons who met under the title of “Team for Local Church Vitalization.” The purpose of this group was to develop programs and resources that would enhance the vitality of churches. Part of their efforts resulted in a manual and training event for local churches to help them each discover ways of revitalizing their ministries.

I felt that to explore the present, one must turn to the past and uncover the development of the local church. Perhaps size would not be a factor I could uncover and

³⁹ 2012 UMC Vital Congregations Planning Guide (Easter Pennsylvania Conference), 3.

follow in the general sense of the local church. But somewhere along the way, it seems to me, we lost track of who we were and what we were about as a people of God. In the past answers, perhaps I could find a clue to hold up against the current situation of the small membership church I was serving. This I will look at in greater depth in the next chapter.

I will now turn and examine the role that the small membership church plays in religious life today. It appeared that the small membership church was continually dealing with the issues of size (relative) and direction (in terms of who it was as a people of God). I will look at the small church from the perspective of four experts in small congregations.

The survival of the small membership church is respected by some and wrestled with by others because, in Ron Crandall's words, "survival is not God's primary purpose for the church."⁴⁰ Crandall asks instead, "What is the will of God for this local church?"

⁴⁰ Ron Crandall, *Turnaround and Beyond, A Hopeful Future for the Small Membership Church*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), xi.

Chapter 2. Developing the Study Guide

1. The Role of the Small Membership Church

“For consider your call...not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption...” (1 Cor. 1:26-30, NRSV)

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to address the issue of unity. He was concerned about dissensions among members. Paul’s words suggest that cliques existed within the single congregation. His words imply that no groups had separated nor had met apart from the rest of the congregation, suggesting dissension over personal loyalties instead of over theological matters. These dissensions, in turn, were seen to be caused by the issue of social status.

The image of the small membership church comes into focus here. Often the small membership church perceives itself as a clique within the larger congregation of the general church. Though there is certainly an inherent connection, the small membership church typically rebels against the constraints of that connection or pretends that it does not even exist. The task one faces in understanding the small membership church is to define the role that a particular local church plays in its given setting.

There appears to be a rather large misconception in the minds of people about the number of small membership churches in existence. Most view the church as the large downtown edifice (that might or might not be in a state of decline itself) but is nevertheless big. Others might point to the size of the Crystal Cathedral and other television edifices of size and affluence. Even for myself, growing up in Seoul, South

Korea, and attending a 1,000-plus member church, the experience of worshipping in a congregation of ten with no organist on a Sunday morning was a far cry from what I ever dreamed the church to be. Yet as Lyle Schaller suggests, “the facts do suggest that the natural size of the worshipping congregation is that of the small church.”⁴¹ According to Schaller:

At the end of 1980, one-half of the 8,832 congregations in the United Presbyterian Church reported a communicant membership of 178 or less. Three quarters of the congregations in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have fewer than 255 participating members. Two thirds of all United Methodist congregations in the United States average less than one hundred at the principle weekly worship service. Fifty-five percent of all congregations in the Lutheran Church in America have fewer than two hundred confirmed members. Nearly three fourths of the congregations in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. include fewer than 250 members. One half of all Southern Baptist Churches report an average attendance of less than seventy in Sunday School, and two thirds report an average of less than 102. Two thirds of all United Church of Christ congregations include fewer than 300 members. One half of the congregations in the Baptist General Conference average less than 105 at worship on Sunday morning.⁴²

What makes a church either large or small? Is the emphasis we tend to place on numerical size a true indication of whether a church is a church? When is there really such an entity as a “small” church? Paul did not tell us about numbers when he spoke about the early church being formed and struggling to survive. Apart from the biblical references to numbers being present in various circumstances, the only criterion Christ had was the “two or three gathered.” Where then does one look to understand this reality that so many have referred to in writing, talking, and teaching about the “small” church?

Schaller understands the typology of the small membership church. Schaller and Carl Dudley concur that “in most main-line congregations, at least 60 percent of the

⁴¹ Lyle E. Schaller, *The Small Church Is Beautiful*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 10.

⁴² *Ibid*, 10.

congregations included are among the “small” churches.”⁴³ It would seem then that to get to the heart of the issue, one must be willing to define “small” in some other fashion than numerical figures.

Size is sometimes an issue that pastors confront when coming into a church situation. Usually, this is so the church might be placed on a scale relative to others that this person has experienced or served previously. In some pastors’ lives, a sign of advancement professionally is that of going from one size church to one of a greater number. This presumes, as often quoted in church studies, that size will mean a larger salary, greater responsibility, and increased levels of church activities.

To get away from over-emphasizing the merits of size, I would suggest that when one defines the “small membership church,” one turn to the understanding of available resources, or potential for ministry, as it relates to the size and resources and energies of a given congregation. This will lead one to look at the programs that a local church offers, the involvement it has in its community and the world beyond, then ultimately its monetary resources.

Faced with fewer members and a more limited source of income, the small membership church of twenty three members is not on the same scale as a church of 500. Simple economics will tell you that the size of the church budget is directly proportional to the activities it can muster, notwithstanding the type (full or part-time) of pastoral ministry present. Size is no indication of the quality of ministry and/or mission.

During a conversation with our Conference Treasurer about the struggles of each of my three churches to pay their apportionments, I asked what he thought the ideal

⁴³ Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 19.

number for a church to be able to function. His reply? “You need fifty families minimum who can raise a \$50,000 salary if you want a full-time pastor.”⁴⁴ Schaller suggests congregations averaging fewer than 175 will be in for a struggle to support a full-time pastor. He places the figure at 150 average attendance for a two-point charge, 124 for a three-point charge.

Schaller proposes the following criteria for the small church:

- (a) Number of members
- (b) Worship attendance
- (c) A comparison with days past when the congregation was much larger
- (d) The image projected by the pastor’s definition of comparative church size
- (e) The size of the building
- (f) The size of the budget
- (g) A full workload for the minister
- (h) An individual’s previous experiences in other congregations
- (i) The quality of caring relationships among the members
- (j) The size, number, and variety of fellowship circles or primary face-to-face groups which together constitute that congregation⁴⁵

More recently, he has revised the criteria to allow for the fact that with a cut-off figure of 250 members used to determine the relative “smallness” of a church, there are indeed varying sizes of small. These include, in his own terms, the “fellowship church” (35 or less); the “small church” (35-100); the “middle-sized church” (100-175); the “awkward size church” (175-225); and, finally, the “large church” (225-450).⁴⁶

The point of all this came home to me when I realized that Avondale church (twenty-three members) and Chatham church (thirty-seven members), joined approximately 100,000 other Protestant congregations in the United States, which average less than thirty-five on a Sunday morning. Also, they were among the small

⁴⁴ From a conversation with the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference Treasurer.

⁴⁵ Lyle E. Schaller, “Looking at the Small Church: A frame of Reference”, *Christian Ministry*, July 1977, 6.

⁴⁶ Lyle E. Schaller, *Looking In The Mirror*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 16.

congregations that would account for “approximately 5% of all Protestant churchgoers on a typical Sabbath”.⁴⁷ Landenberg (125 members) could count itself fortunate that it was a part of the one-third of Protestant churches in North America who also average thirty-five on a Sunday morning.

There are several names that recur as experts on the subject of the small membership church. Schaller, Carl Dudley, Jackson Carroll, and Paul Madsen are but a few. Each comes into the arena with concerns about the small membership church and its presence in the American religious scene today. My omission of other scholars’ works is not meant to imply a lack of resources available in pursuing this topic. Yet, in the interest of a comparison, these four were chosen as more or less being representative of the greater whole. I offer here a brief overview of each of their perspectives.

1.1 Lyle Schaller

Lyle Schaller has long been recognized as an expert on congregational dynamics and components. His description of the small membership church is contained in his book, *The Small Church Is Different!* The title, with accompanying exclamation point, indicates the determination behind his statement. The book is written from the perspective that the small membership church is a part of God’s intended order of creation. It differs from other self-help analyses in that it considers the small membership church solely from its own vantage point.

In his work, he lifts up “perspective,” “policies,” and “priorities” as three concepts that help one to see how the small membership church is different from its

⁴⁷ Lyle E. Schaller, *Looking In The Mirror*, 15.

larger counterparts. His first chapter offers a greater understanding of the need for perspective in the local church setting. Simply stated, how one looks at the small membership church and from what vantage point determines the basis of his or her observations concerning its character. Schaller, in this chapter, raises up twenty points that clearly clarify how the small membership church is different and unique in its own light. It is a good measuring stick for one's morale and sense of hope in the future. He addresses the frustrations one faces in the small membership church when people continually say they would like to do all the things larger churches can.

The second category Schaller uses is that of "policies," and by this, he refers to the official and informal operational policies concerning the small membership church. Paralleled in my own experience, upon receiving my first appointment to a rural two-point charge, I was told by the District Superintendent that if I stayed a year, I would be doing better than others before me. The opposite occurred when the next year, I was appointed to a large suburban parish as an associate and told that I was expected to stay there a long time. The official line is longer pastorates in large churches, yet our informal operational policy is not to expect a long tenure in a marginal small church setting.

The third category Schaller identifies is "priorities". Talking with the pastor of a large membership church, he or she is certain to tell you how many were in church last Sunday, how large the Sunday school is, how many choirs the church has, how big a facility the church must maintain, how large an offering was collected, etc. The pastor of a small church cannot hope to compete in such a conversation without a tremendous feeling of inadequacy. For in the small membership church, the priority is on relationships as they are lived within the context of the church, which in almost all cases,

is the same as the community at large. The greatest compliment I ever received while serving the small membership church was the one that let me know how important it was that I mentioned the deceased person's name during the funeral service. This is what is most important in the small membership church—being known by the pastor and being known by the other members by name. Just as important, on a different scale, is making sure all the bills are paid.

1.2 Carl Dudley

In *Making the Small Church Effective*, Carl Dudley presents an opportunity for introspection for the church member. His premise is that negative attitudes about the small membership church are indeed a form of prejudice. He seeks to lift up the small membership church as a worthy model of the Christian church.

Dudley sees relationships as the key to unlock the differences between churches of different sizes. His own experience of serving small membership churches earlier on in his career leads him to observe: “The majority of Protestant churches are small, and they are everywhere...small churches have taken roots everywhere.”⁴⁸

Perhaps it was his observation about the depth of the relationships evident in the small membership church which enabled him to comment on the subject so well. He alludes to one of the more striking features of the small membership church I have uncovered in this project: they are unable to fold-up their tents and die when all other common sense would indicate such a course of action. As he suggests, the small

⁴⁸ Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective*, 21.

membership church is here to stay and will continue to be as viable a part of the changing church institution as it had always been.

The book is thus a series of experiences of self-discovery which work to affirm the positives about the small membership church and at the same time highlight those portions of its life which give it a sense of integrity. Each chapter underscores the feelings that one develops as one becomes a part of the church and discovers his or her own belonging. Dudley's bias is toward the small membership church, where one will discover integrity and belonging to the fullest extent.

1.3 Paul Madsen

Paul Madsen makes his own three-point plea for the small membership church as he, in his book, affirms it as “valid, vital, and victorious.” Challenging the commonly held assumption that size is what counts, he refutes the attitude that “to be small is wrong.”⁴⁹ His concern is for the many types of communities—urban, agricultural, metropolitan—which once were growing and now are in a state of decline. The question is whether there is hope.

The parable of the lost sheep has significance for Madsen as he relates its understanding to the need for “careful planning so that the children of this day, wherever they live, may hear the Good News.”⁵⁰ He understands the small membership church to have a particular and unequaled place in the task of mission. The key ingredients needed are encouragement and recognition of the small church's status.

⁴⁹ Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, 9.

⁵⁰ Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, 12.

Madsen's definition of the small membership church is a particularly good one: "a church that is hard pressed to maintain an organization and committee structure that permits it to participate fully, completely, and in a satisfying way in the life of the denomination and the community."⁵¹

He lists several reasons for small size:

1) An Inadequate Program: not having a sustained Christian Education program, a regular program of evangelism, the involvement of the lay members in calling on persons, a regular program of Bible Study, involvement in worship, involvement in social outreach, and concern.

2) An Inadequate Field: not having a community within a twenty-minute drive to the church, nor having an adequate number of persons to draw upon in a declining community.

3) Inadequate Evangelism: the irony of wanting new members yet having the "old guard" unwilling to change and allow newcomers to be actively involved in the church life. It is typified by the conservatism of long-term members toward change.

4) An Inadequate Vision: lack of development of a new, creative approach to ministry to allow an opportunity for growth in a static or declining community. The most difficult situation in which to attempt change is the so-called "Family Chapel," where the majority of members are interrelated. "Any change in programming becomes difficult because of the "clan" and their feelings for each other."

5) Inadequate Personalities: akin to what one experiences upon attending a cold church versus a friendly church. Growth declines because the personality of a church is

⁵¹ Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, 16

not winsome. Causes vary for this, but generally, are attributed to the fact that people like a small church, and thus want to keep it that way. The effect is compounded when a community undergoes change because of economic or sociological reasons. What was dependable in the community vanishes. The church thus presents a place where people can turn for refuge and stability. The old hymns, familiar buildings, and the traditional form of services give a feeling of security in a changing world, but they can also lead to a static or dying church.⁵²

What then is the hope of the small membership church? Madsen suggests: “The small church often needs to find a new standard for its life, in a full spiritual ministry to all who live within its shadow”.⁵³ He cites three essentials: “warmth and intimacy of fellowship; the possibility of identifying the mission and concentrating upon it; and the ability to be more flexible in approach, to minimize structure and reach an agreement more easily.”⁵⁴ If the most vital aspect is courage, then success is possible in turning the church and its community around from decline and a static situation.

But how does a church, especially in a rural setting, know when it succeeds? When people are allowed to withdraw into the church to get away from the world, the church measures success by the number of people who attend its activities. When participants are allowed to become dependent upon the church to find a place of service in the world or allow the church to dominate their social relationships, success is measured by the number of activities taking place in the church’s building, the number participating, or the number served.

⁵² Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, 19-26.

⁵³ Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, 29.

⁵⁴ Paul O. Madsen, *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*, 29-30.

When the primary task of the church is understood to be accepting people in weakness and helping them return them to the world in strength, success is measured in terms of the quality of lives that have been renewed.

“The test of the Christian religion is whether the worship of God enables the worshipper to come to terms with the facts of life, and to seek to establish relationships with people so that the society which results enhances human express this another way, the value of the Christian religion, in human terms at least, is not seen by its success in attracting worshippers, or in the number of converts, but by assessing whether the presence of a Christian institution within a society (many of whom will not be churchgoers) to control; and govern their lives according to love, peace, justice, righteousness, and freedom.”⁵⁵

The measurement of success according to these criteria is always difficult and sometimes impossible. But why do churches need to be concerned with measuring their success? Some may feel the necessity of doing so because they are not sure of themselves or their primary task. Other churches may need quantitative tests to soothe their guilt for not performing the primary task.

The purpose of the church, whether large or small, is to enable “members of society in their role as citizens to engage with the real human needs of their community, by helping them in their role as worshippers to realize their full humanity.”⁵⁶ The testimony of church members and non-members alike will witness to God at work in the church redeeming and renewing lives for the task of imparting meaning to all of life.

⁵⁵ Bruce Reed, *The Task of the Church and the Role of Its Members*, (New York: The Alban Institute, 1976), 8.

⁵⁶ Bruce Reed, *The Task of the Church and the Role of Its Members*, 24.

2. Approaches to church survival

When I first began to research the feasibility of this project, I contacted the Conference Executive of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. My intention was to draw upon his experience in the areas of church dynamics and training opportunities so that I might get a picture of how I might proceed. It was through his suggestions over the past three years that I had attended many workshops put on by The Center for Parish Development and others in the areas of church growth and pastoral leadership styles. I also had the opportunity to attend several of the offerings through the Center for Continuing Education at Princeton Seminary. There, I had attended workshops in conflict management and resolution, and interpersonal dynamics. Each of these had contributed to greater awareness of the various facets of ministry I had encountered and would encounter, yet, none addressed, specifically, the issue I was now facing in my local church charge.

In several conversations with my Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Executive, I was led to believe that there really were no specific instruments that would address the churches hanging on in the face of their declining communities. He suggested that I contact the General Board of Global Ministries and several other agencies. Then I found out what work was being done at the level of the local church. However, it was so difficult to find someone who might handle the area of my particular concerns. Finally, I got some resources. These were helpful in terms of formulating my approach to the mission statement portion of the Study Guide. However, these were not sufficient for the more crucial issue I was trying to address—that of church survival.

I had considered, at that moment, abandoning the project and beginning from a new perspective. Yet, as I worked into the lives of the three local churches I served, I was even more convinced that the most significant thing I could do in the life of these churches would be to develop an instrument that would address their situation. I decided to forge ahead and develop an instrument that could help rethink and revitalize ministry in changing communities.

From my experiences in the workshops I had attended, as well as from the variety of books written about the church in terms of growing and changing, I learned that I would have to piece together the basis of the instrument I was planning to use. I also found that Schaller's *Creative Leadership Series* would provide some insight into the key areas I was facing in terms of understanding the nature and scope of the "small town church."⁵⁷

One of the facets I had wanted to be sure to include in the project was that of attempting to reach out beyond the connection and see what other denominations might or might not be doing in this area. I found that only one was involved in the exact process I was considering, though not primarily with just the small membership church in mind. Through the help of my Ministerium pastors and priests, I was able to obtain a copy of the work being attempted by the Roman Catholic Church.

This chapter will be an opportunity to highlight five major resources in the creation of my Study Guide. This is not to suggest that perhaps there are no others, but to

⁵⁷ Suggested reading in this subject included in the *Creative Leadership Series*, Lyle Schaller, editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press); specifically C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Be Healthy* (1979); William H. Willimon and Robert L. Wilson, *Preaching and Worship in the Small Church* (1980); Peter J Surrey, *The Small Town Church* (1981); and Douglas Alan Walrath, *Leading Churches Through Change* (1979).

say that these are what I was able to uncover and share. I trust that the other resources that are available in local denominational offices might one day be put together in like manner and thus improve on my modest beginning.

My intention here is to summarize the work and point out how each was helpful in my work. They are, in order, “The Church Information Form” from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A); “God’s people at work in the Parish” out of the Lutheran tradition; the “Study on Parish Ministry” from the Catholic Church; “Administration in the Small Membership Church” and “Small Membership Church, Serving with significance in Your Context” from The United Methodist Church perspective; and the “Church Vitalization Check List” from The Center for Parish Development, along with related materials used in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.

2.1 The Church Information Form

I became acquainted in my search with the “Church information Form”. The neighboring Presbyterian Church was in the midst of calling a new pastor, and one of the requirements was that they undergo this process. The purpose would be for the church to turn a critical eye on itself and analyze its understanding of ministry and mission to develop these into a statement. The statement would be a self-evaluation and self-appraisal of the mission and ministry of the church. It would address and deal with both strengths and weaknesses.

The process involves the formation of a committee to answer questions contained in the form. From conversations with those who have used it, I learned the process is time-consuming and exhaustive. It forces committees to come to terms with the identity

and theological mindset of a given church community. I understand that it has also proven useful in identifying internal church dynamics and politics. The end result of the process is the writing out of all that has been gleaned from the conversations and meetings and gathering some basic data pertaining to the size of membership, budget amounts, and giving patterns over the past few years.

I found the idea of undergoing such a self-appraisal before the beginning of a pastorate intriguing. It occurred to me that had the churches I was now serving gone through such a process, they would have saved me much time trying to figure out the dynamics and realities of each church situation. Instead, this type of information was what I first needed to gather and put together before the actual work of the project could be put into practice. I thus used the basic outline of questioning as the basis for gathering this information after I arrived in the church settings. I would attempt to piece the parts together through conversations with the leaders, at meetings, and what was learned from visiting elderly shut-ins and other parish members.

The church information form would be useful to all denominations interested in knowing more about a church before a call or the appointment of a pastor. The United Methodist Church uses a “Church Profile” form in its present appointment process. According to *The Book of Discipline*, “the district superintendent shall develop with the pastor and the committees on pastor-parish relations of all churches profiles that reflect the needs, characteristics, and opportunities for the mission of the charge consistent with the Church’s statement of purpose.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, 348.

The Church Profile is useful to a new pastor. It can be helpful in local church self-assessment in the appointment process. For it to be more effective, the process would have to be done well before the usual April or May appointments, or it would have to be done for a church to be filled with an interim pastor while undergoing the process. It would seem to me that with our present system of yearly appointments beginning after the dates of Annual Conferences, that it would take some forward-thinking Bishops and Cabinets to inject this type of process into our appointment system.

I can, however, anticipate that this process would be useful to any church facing the issue of continued survival or simply needing to know more about itself. It is a good way to take an overall look at the church and how it sees its primary task, its place in its community, as well as the role it sees itself undertaking as a people of God called to ministry and mission.

2.2 God's People at Work in the Parish

In *God's People at Work in the Parish*, Charles S. Mueller creates a training manual for use in the local church. Coming out of the Task Force for Planning and Coordination of the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, this manual was created in response to a request: "Christians, busy in the ministry of God's Word through the local parish, are asking for help to do it better."⁵⁹

This manual was designed to be used in an annual planning retreat or by parish committees in monthly meetings. It proved useful in providing an overview of the subject

⁵⁹ Charles S. Mueller, *God's People at Work in the Parish*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), i.

with which I was dealing. It provides a scheme for a detailed analysis of one's church setting.

This resource approached the issue of the church and its ministry with four assumptions in mind. These were:

1. We are God's people.
2. As God's people, we have work to do.
3. We work in our parish (area) through our parish (congregation).
4. The focus of our work is to let God use us to make learners of others.⁶⁰

I felt that this would be appropriate for my project because it began with a theological dimension. What this approach calls for is testing against what the people of the church perceive is their particular relationship with God. Rather than focus on numerical or statistical data, this study opts to pursue the theological agenda as it is experienced and lived out in the local church.

This resource would be useful to others facing the issue of church survival for several reasons. First, it is intended as a workbook that allows one to write in his/her own particular agenda. Second, it provides a comprehensive framework by which to analyze the many and varied components of a church in a critical light. Third, its focus is on the issue of how the people of God are at work in the world as they attempt to be the church. This was a dimension that I struggled with fairly regularly in my situation. It seemed that it would be exciting to introduce this theological perspective into the more mundane questions, "Can we pay our bills?" or "Can we pay the preacher?"

⁶⁰ Charles S. Mueller, *God's People at Work in the Parish*, 12.

2.3 Study on Parish Ministry

The “Study on Parish Ministry” was formulated by the office of Research and Planning of the Archdiocese of Newark. I became familiar with its existence through the courtesy of a Catholic pastor in my local Ministerium. It became for me a prime example of how a non-protestant church group was facing a similar issue of church survival.

Part of the impetus behind the study was the growing realization on the part of the Archdiocese of Newark that it covers a large area with a large population, and yet less than half of this number is Catholic. Citing an example from the 2018 United States Catholic Conference, the point is made:

“While there remains a variety of expression of local community in a diocese, the parish remains the focal point in so far as it takes a fundamental reality of human life—the neighborhood or rural community—and makes it the springboard for pastoral ministry. Since the fifth century the parish has been the primary local Eucharistic community within the diocese. It is an organic unity which is concerned with ministry to the whole person and to all people. ‘Parishes are important not for their own sake but for their witness of priests, religious and laity living together as a community of faith and concern.’”⁶¹

This study suited my needs because it was the only such vehicle that I came across that was being sponsored by denominational authorities. The Archdiocese of Newark was in the forefront in recognizing that, in the midst of declining neighborhoods and community parish support, it was time to take a comprehensive look at the issue of the continued survival of each parish. Their goals for the study were two-fold: (a) “To strengthen the Church’s presence in every geographic area of the Archdiocese”; and (b)

⁶¹ Office of Research and Planning, *Study on Parish Ministry*, (New Jersey: Archdiocese of Newark, 2018). 1.

“To reinforce the Church’s ministry of service by means of new and creative possibilities.”⁶²

What I found most useful in this study was the brevity of its plan for such a study. It was clearly defined and well thought out in terms of the specific steps that churches would follow along the way. There was a clear indication of accountability in terms of reporting back the information that was gathered. Finally, it provided a framework in which the local church would be held accountable in terms of future decisions and plans.

The use of this study made me long for, in a sense, a similar resource by which United Methodist Churches could be held accountable. It seems that if a local annual conference could unilaterally advocate such a planned study, the results would be great indeed regarding the status of many churches. However, there would remain the lack of authority by which the general church could then mandate action if closure or merger were indicated by the study. The present autonomy of each local United Methodist Church today prohibits such parental and/or authoritative action.⁶³ Clearly then the impetus for any such resource would have to come on the local church level first and therein gain support for its acceptance.

I would again recommend this study to a church seeking to further clarify its reason for being. Using this study will enable a church parish to undertake a real and significant assessment of its place and role as a church in a given community.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The Issue of whether a local church is accountable to the connection of The United Methodist Church is often taken for granted. When a church is abandoned, ceases to hold services, or deliberately violates Church law, there are appropriate steps that can be taken to close the local church. However, when a local church just continues to limp along and is declining in all facets of its corporate life but refuses to close, there is no piece of legislation to force it to close. It is this dilemma that is the basis for my arguments in this project.

2.4 Administration in the small membership church and guidelines for small membership churches

The United Methodist Church published guidelines for leading the congregation. *Small Membership Church: Serving with Significance in Your Context* provides guidelines for those local churches within the denomination which had 200 or fewer members. *Administration in the Small Membership Church* describes church administration as a ministry in the small membership church. This book describes how these small churches might organize themselves to function effectively. It also provides job descriptions for the various leadership positions so that one can understand what its proposed changes entail.

For the purpose of my project, I found this resource helpful in guiding the formulation of the alternative style of organization for the small membership church, as opposed to those in place, which continually overwhelmed them. For example, if a church were to have in a place all the required persons listed for the Administrative Council, that number would total over forty persons. In the case of the Avondale church with twenty-three members, one can see how this might prove overwhelming.

I would recommend this handbook to any church that has undertaken a study and is looking for a resource for what to do next. This will prove beneficial in providing a framework of structure and responsibility as the church seeks to make the best use of the people it has on hand.

2.5 The Church Vitalization Readiness checklist

Lastly, the Church Vitalization Readiness checklist is available from the Center for Parish Development as a tool to determine if a particular church is ready to participate

in a planned process of study and self-examination. This was the instrument that I first used to test the waters in my local church settings.

This simple questionnaire is a good resource to begin a process of study and planning for the future of a parish. It can certainly be used as a barometer to determine if the church leadership is ready or not to propose the issue. By the Church Vitalization Readiness standards, I found that all three of my churches were positioned to being a process of self-examination, though that was certainly no indication of how easy the process would be to undertake in each setting. Instead, it was just what it was, an indicator of whether a church was in the right temperament to consider reorganize or not.

It is my hope that the brief overview which I have provided for each of these resources will suffice to introduce you to the study I developed for this project. Each of them contributed to the whole, and I am indebted to the persons who made their existence a reality.

Chapter 3. Description and Application of Study Guide

1. The role of the parish religious interview

Shortly after my appointment to the three churches comprising the Landenberg charge, I met with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee to set priorities for the first year of my ministry there. What we arrived at was more of a wish list, in that most of what was wanted were dreams, rather than attainable realities. We attempted to narrow them down to three realistic priorities from the initial thirty-five and prioritize them according to overall needs versus specific church needs. The result was a desire for (1) visitation of members; (2) calling on shut-ins; and (3) calling more people back to church who had left for one reason or another.

It seemed that all three of the priorities had the underlying concern for people who were formerly a part of the church community or were on its outskirts. My first task was to take the membership lists and begin calling on everyone, find out who and where they were, and find out their level of involvement. The problem I was to discover was that no one had kept up the updated list in any of the three churches. With a succession of part-time or local pastors, the administration of record-keeping was far from current. In fact, an accurate list of members eludes me to this very day.

My immediate need was to be able to organize the parish—to know specifically who a member was, who attended as a constituent, and who simply lived in the community with no affiliation or with affiliation to another church. I brought this dilemma before the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and the Administrative Council of each church. As a result of the counsel I received, I was all for calling from door to door, as my committee suggested. My frustration with this apparent solution was that with such

an approach, how could I be sure I did not miss anyone? What followed in my first two years was a haphazard and random pattern of calling that basically was determined by who the people in church suggested I go and see next. As I look back now on that experience, I know that I missed a great many souls because they were not a part of the group that attended the churches or who were considered as being worthy of a personal call from the pastor.

It was on the occasion of this project that I came across the “Parish Initial Religious Interview” form (Appendix B) and saw in it the answer to my prayers. It was given to me by my mentor pastor, who, after hearing of my need for an idea to organize my calling, gave me this form that he developed for use in his own parish setting. I use it with his permission and blessing.

The form is divided into thirty-eight question components and is meant to be used as a vehicle for keeping track of who the persons are in a parish community. The saving grace of this type of information is that it provides an opportunity to fine-tune one’s calling by gathering specific information for each person. I have found that in the initial interview, I may not complete the whole form, but that it provides a ready reference point to go back to when I next call on that person.

When I first presented it to my Councils, there was widespread encouragement of its use. I found that the word got around fairly quickly that the “preacher was coming to ask you questions” and that “he even wrote down what I said.” Certainly, the use of this form granted a measure of intentionality to my calls in both my perspective and that of the community. It will also serve as a source of information for my successor and each church.

Each church would find that the data from these forms were most important as we proceeded with the project study. Looking back, what was originally perceived as missing from much of what we were asking was: (1) who were the members out there; (2) how many have left the church and why; and (3) what about all the other people—where, if any place, are they going?

I also discovered that with the Landenberg Church, in particular, it helped to shed some light on some commonly assumed myths. For example, the church is perceived by the old guard as the place that anyone who lives in the town of Landenberg or Avondale would necessarily go to worship. The old guard mentioned here are those who are considered native residents of the town by virtue of their years of having lived there.

I found in both towns that perhaps this would be where the data gathered would be helpful. It would also be used to compare the census data about our area to assist us in answering questions about our church's survival as completely as possible.

I was able in each church to get a partial listing of the membership by getting a copy of the mailing lists used for the Stewardship campaign. After a bit of detective work, I was able to come up with the 125 members associated with Landenberg, the twenty-three associated with Avondale, and the thirty-seven associated with Chatham. From that point, I began contacting and visiting members of the community person-by-person in order to get as complete a picture as possible.

The rationale with which I approached this endeavor was to be able to identify in my parish communities. I felt it was important also to know where they lived and to know something about their personal lives as it related to their life of faith through the church.

Part of this was inspired by the fact that, after my arrival, I was called upon to officiate the funeral service of a woman who had long been a mainstay of both the Landenberg and Avondale communities. She was well-loved and respected by members of all three church communities. My frustration mounted as, beyond these facts, I could learn nothing more about this person and felt inadequate conducting the funeral service at the church.

A second reason for making this such an important facet of the project was that I felt that there would be a measure of satisfaction gained from it. One of the criticisms I had been under was not making enough pastoral calls to the right people. No means of attempting to clarify this issue either to my satisfaction or that of any of the church groups were successful. Thus, I felt that an ordered and planned procedure would be the best way for me to succeed. It would also provide, from its members, invaluable insights into the life of each church community for my project.

When I originally proposed this, it was suggested that this visitation process would prove too lengthy and time-consuming. It did take longer than I had anticipated—it was late April before I completed the final interview. The results, though, were and are well worth the time investment. I feel the project would be less than complete without the insights I could offer in each of the study group settings. These insights are based on the conversations shared by the people with their pastor about their church and its meaning in their lives.

Many times, the input I offered was new to the members of the group, or it was from a perspective that they had not previously considered. For example, in one of the Landenberg church meetings, the statement was made, “There are plenty of people in this

town who do not go to church here and should.” The reality of the situation was that most people did, in fact, go to other churches quite regularly. They simply did not attend this church. Thus, I would encourage any pastor to use these forms to get an accurate reading on the pulse of the church and community.

A copy of the form is included in Appendix B. It is self-explanatory and is meant to be adapted and revised for each church setting it is used in. The format here is the one used in my appointment to the Landenberg Charge.

It would be too long an undertaking to compiling all of the possible points of information for each church community. I will rather highlight the major points that were concentrated upon in each community and its church.

In Avondale:

- 23 Members Interviewed
- 6 Active—would support and attend
- 12 Shut-ins—unable to attend or support
- 5 Inactive—no desire to become active

In Chatham:

- 37 Members Interviewed
- 16 Active—would support and attend
- 8 Shut-ins—unable to attend or support
- 13 Inactive—no desire to become active

A major use to which this information was put was deciding how either church could continue. Would it be a single church alone, or possibly merged with the other, in light of potential members’ availability? In each setting, a basic group of five families kept each church building open for Sunday morning worship. The unknown for these persons was what the feeling of other members toward the continued existence of each church was and what our potential beyond our members was.

It was the Landenberg group's intention to look at the results to determine potential resources, in terms of persons and financial support available to support the church. The majority felt that the data provided would enable them to look at these factors specifically in terms of giving potential. Thus, the information gathered was to be used to coordinate a Stewardship campaign. The following is a listing of their key numbers:

- 125 Members Interviewed
- 87 Gave specific responses
- 2 Withdrew formal membership
- 38 Already joined another church
- 85 Members in the church to stay
- 15 Out-of-towners – over 1 hour away
- 23 Active—willing to support, no money.
- 40 Inactive—no support
- 7 Active—pledged money

One of the most interesting facts that emerged in this particular church setting is that out of the eighty-five members who responded that they wanted to keep their church membership intact, only seven chose to financially support the church, and six indicated their intention to attend worship services. Suddenly, it became clear that the reason there was an average attendance of twenty to twenty-five people on Sunday morning was due to the low number who actually wanted to be a part of the church.

2. The Study Guide Progress: Can our small membership church continue to survive?

2.1 History

I was appointed to serve the Landenberg Charge in the South District of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church. This charge was, according to the 2016 Conference Journal reports, composed of the Landenberg (125

members), Avondale (twenty-three members), and Chatham (thirty-seven members) churches. Each was a small membership church struggling with the very real issue of its continued survival. It was our agreement from the beginning that the number one priority would be to examine the situation of each church and formulate a plan of action to help it best determine the viability of its ministry. A secondary priority was to examine the nature and understanding of the mission each church had in its particular setting.

The Landenberg Church had been part of a two-point charge with New London Church, located six miles from the Landenberg Church, before joining with Avondale and Chatham on July 1, 2016. The other church decided, as Landenberg members confirm, that it wanted to sever the relationship with Landenberg to align with a nearby two-point charge. It was the feeling at the time that the people of the New London Church had more in common with the community of West Grove than that of Landenberg. An unspoken, yet privately shared, reason concerns the pastorate of the Rev. Sharon Paul. She was the first woman pastor to serve either of these two churches. Other insiders point to friction that developed over the years; the Landenberg Church had a history of being too critical of the pastor and attempting to tell him what to do and when.

The Landenberg Church has approximately fifty resident members who live within a fifteen-minute drive of the church. Many of the remaining listed members moved away long ago and never removed their names from the membership list. It is generally agreed that one extended family runs this church. The Lang family openly acknowledges this fact. Family hegemony was the reason the majority of people stopped attending the church. Though four households of this family had been active in determining the church's direction, the lead is clearly given to "Aunt Eloise," who is in

her late seventies, and "Esther," who is a few years younger. Their relationship has in common the fact that Esther married Eloise's brother, Merwin, who for thirty-five years was the chair of the Church Trustees. Eloise has been a widow much of her adult life; her husband was killed in a car wreck six months into their marriage. She had married late in life and is but one of two members of the Lang family that originally settled in this area. The family came from a farming background, and her attitude toward every pastor appointed is that of a hired hand who will do what she dictates. Of the roughly \$48,000 church budget, she alone contributes \$15,000. A great deal of influence has centralized in one person, given that nearly a third of the church budget comes from a single parishioner.

Avondale Church's history is characterized by a split that occurred in 1995. It was then that a group of fifteen families of the Avondale Church became dissatisfied with the Methodist Conference over the issue of apportionments and attempted to force the closure of Avondale. They carried their plan out by withdrawing their support, and when survival was no longer possible, having the building closed and declared abandoned. They then attempted to get the conference to sell "their" church back to them. Five families remained behind, and it was their effort that enabled the church to maintain its denominational tie. Thus, the other group was forced to start up a new congregation in a local farmhouse a member provided.

By 2015, the Avondale Church was in "a sad state of affairs," according to its historian, because of the loss of more members. A retired pastor continued to conduct services for twelve to fifteen people every week for most of that year and into the next. By Easter Sunday of 2016, the only people present for worship were the pastor, the

organist, and five others. The pastor resigned the following day, and services were discontinued without so much as a formal declaration. On July 1, 2016, Avondale and Chatham were put on the charge with Landenberg, and services resumed.

In the case of Avondale, the power base is unclear compared to the Landenberg situation. Almost by default, the church's leadership fell upon two women whose families stayed behind after the two splits because of their loyalty to the Methodist church. Frances and Joyce are unrelated by any conventional tie other than their love for the Avondale Church and what it has long stood for in their community. Each is a reluctant leader who would just as soon give the job to someone else. Their husbands do not regularly attend church, so they carry the leadership load by themselves, yet with a laissez-faire attitude.

The Chatham Church remained the stronger of the two during Avondale's transition. Chatham's membership stayed consistently around thirty-five, with new members being added as the present members' children, for the most part, grew up and came of age. Even though the children would grow up and move out of the area, they would each maintain membership in the church and return for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. On the whole, eight major family groups constitute the membership of the church. Five non-members attend regularly. The primary reason for their participation is the choir.

The choir is directed by Lois, a woman whose family has been in the church for thirty years and is perhaps the driving force of this particular congregation and its activity. She and a trio of other women run Chatham. The men, as in most farming communities, are busy on Sunday morning or simply do not attend. Thus, the burden of

leadership activity and power is invested in the women. It is generally agreed to by the men that whatever the women want is fine with them.

The Avondale and Chatham churches had been worshiping together for about three months before my arrival, and there had been some talk about forming a committee to work toward a merger. The dreamers behind a merger were Frances, Joyce (Avondale) and Lois (Chatham), plus a few of their immediate family members. Other than a combined choir, there were no other joint activities between the churches. Each maintains its own organizational structure.

2.2 The Background

The rural small membership church finds itself in a particular environment today, which can perhaps be best described as turbulent. In many ways, the church is much like the people of Israel who left captivity in Egypt, wandered for two generations in the wilderness, and then arrived on the borders of the Promised Land. The churches that I serve are on the frontier of an uncertain future.

Israel sent spies into the Promised Land with this instruction,

“...go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land.” (Number 13:17-20 NRSV)

So, the spies entered the Promised Land, and over forty days they gathered information. When they returned, they brought with them some of the fruit of the land along with glowing reports that it truly was a land flowing with milk and honey.

When this report was heard, the people of Israel were hopeful because the future had lost its uncertainty; they were to go into a good land where the future could indeed be bright. After having wandered for forty years in the wilderness, they could, at last, be joyful and look ahead to a promising future.

But the spies also brought the news that the land was filled with giants. When the people of Israel heard this, they were so frightened that they nearly revolted against Moses and their other leaders. Some of the people were ready to return to Egypt. Others were willing to remain in the wilderness forever, if necessary, rather than face those giants.

After much turmoil, the entire group was convinced to take the risks that the future held for them. The wilderness experience changed for them at this moment. Where previously it had been a time of directionless wandering, now it became a time of preparation and equipping, of planning and inward development, so that when the invasion took place, the people of Israel would be strong enough to face these giants in their encounters.

The churches of Avondale, Chatham, and Landenberg have been wandering during the last two or more decades. Until the 1980s they all enjoyed membership gains and increased financial giving, which resulted in stability. Their future looked bright and hopeful. However, warning signs appeared. As they considered the future, obstacles surfaced: basic demographic changes that have been emptying out rural areas, specific events in the lives of the communities such as businesses closing, and many others. The church knows from its own story that it is called into the world to witness to God's reconciling power and to proclaim a word of hope and healing as it concerns itself with

its primary task. That task entails receiving people as they are, enabling them to submit their lives in dependence upon the incarnate Christ through faith, and then returning to their community renewed and strengthened for participation in other local church and community involvements as the loving embodiments of Christian love and action. Yet, like Israel, as it looks at that turbulent and uncertain future, it is tempted to avoid contact with the world, to ignore the rumors about those giants, and to withdraw into itself.

It would seem that such withdrawal may be a healthy step for a church to take if, like Israel, it becomes a time of preparation to unify the church around a common sense of identity, a common sense of purpose, a common understanding of ministry and mission. This can be a productive time for the church if it equips its leaders for their work and mobilizes itself for making a significant impact on the world. The study that I have developed is directed towards this end. Its focus is on the members of the church. In a sense, it is as if Christ the Good Shepherd has called the church members like lambs into the fold for shelter, food, and refreshment. In the safety of the fold, God's people may minister to each other, recall again their story and tradition, celebrate and sing, and equip themselves with new insights and skills, so that they will be prepared to go back into the world to do the work of Christ.

If the church is faithful to its calling to be an agent of reconciliation in a broken and divided world, it must engage in ministry and mission to the world around it. It is as if Christ the Sower goes out into the world and scatters his people like seed into every relationship of life so that they might share with others the quality of relationships, the sense of purpose, and the commitment to lasting values which they have experienced

within the church. The goal is a world reconciled with God. The church has been commissioned to be God's witnessing community in the world.

This two-pointed emphasis is intended to keep in the forefront the balance that needs to exist in the relation of the church to the world and to itself. There is no way to escape the fact that the church is always related to the environment, being influenced by it, and in turn influencing it. The concern of this study is to point to ways in which the church can be equipped to make a more faithful and effective impact on the environment of which it finds itself apart.

2.3 How this project is set up

This study is designed for a United Methodist congregation. The terminology, language, and implications are for a church in that connection.

It calls for six weekly meetings, each lasting about two hours. Six weeks seems to be a reasonable amount of time for persons to give when one considers the importance of the issue at hand and allows them time to do some worthwhile work. The study is best done when it is a major emphasis in the life of the congregation for those six weeks.

The group is made up of members chosen by the pastor in consultation with the church Lay Leader and Administrative Council chairperson. There will be no more than ten and no fewer than six members of each study group. Members will agree before starting the study to commit themselves to the totality of the project and attend all meetings.

There is individual preparation that will need to be done in advance of each meeting. This will be concerned with bible study and reflection. Each person will be given the appropriate handouts pertaining to the task of each meeting.

The group activity in each meeting is the heart of the study. Sharing information and insights regarding what the Bible has to say about the congregational mission and celebrating the life God sends can give energy and vitality, especially when people begin to develop a shared understanding of who they are as the church of Jesus Christ. This will be balanced with discussions about the local church regarding many of its activities and aspects. Combined, the two will provide a sounding board for each other.

It is better not to plan meals in connection with the weekly meetings. Preparing for meals and cleaning up seems to take too much time away from what the meeting is called to do. Neither are there any “coffee breaks” allowed for in the design. Instead, light refreshments might be available all during each meeting. A relaxed, informal, and enjoyable atmosphere is important, something smaller congregations seem to do well anyhow.

The Sunday morning worship service holds several possibilities related to this project study:

1. The Bible selections provide a good basis for sermons and themes for worship during the study.
2. Time is set aside for an update on the work of the committee during the sharing of joys and concerns of the community.
3. During the study, prayer support from the congregation is requested each week.

2.4 Leadership for this project study

The pastor will lead the study. The group will be approved by the Administrative Council before beginning the project study. The group will elect or appoint a spokesperson to report to the congregation each week. An appointed recording secretary will keep track of pertinent points each week to help in the review process the following week.

The role of the pastor is crucial. She or he is to be primarily responsible for conducting the meetings. The role of the pastor is to provide support and encouragement as well as specific directions. The pastor needs to make every effort—and group members will need help in this—to avoid giving answers or determining the outcome of the group's work.

Basically, I see three leadership types expected of the pastor as she or he attempts to fulfill the role. The first is that of catalyst so that the impetus for the project is supported and encouraged by the pastor. The second is that of "guide." Here the pastor will lead the study group through the examination of scripture and assist in the process of analyzing the ministry and mission of the church in this light. The pastor will also be expected to guide the people through the reflection process by keeping the group aware of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Third, the pastor will be the resource person responsible for as much of the content as possible. The pastor's assistance in gathering data will greatly contribute to keeping the group's progress moving. On top of these, certainly, the individual gifts and graces of the pastor will be an important part of the whole process.

2.5 How to get started

The steps to initiate the study are as follows:

1) Some people will need to sense the obvious benefits of this project before they begin. There are perhaps several times in a church's life that this would be appropriate, hopefully not just when a to-close-or-not-to-close decision looms. These might be: when the church is aware of an impending pastoral change of appointment; when a new pastor will arrive, to acquaint him or her with the nature of this particular congregation and its community; when there is an expressed need for congregational renewal (the study offers a means to open the church to Biblical insights, to other persons who are a part of the congregation, to the community, and most importantly to God's Spirit); and when a leadership team is looking for a meaningful and significant total church program for perhaps an annual planning retreat.

2) Those sensing the benefits of involvement in this project study will recommend to the administrative council that a committee consisting of the pastor, lay leader, and administrative council chairperson review the study in its entirety and report back to the council as to whether or not the project study should be undertaken.

3) A positive recommendation to the administrative council by this committee might be:

- i. That the Council approves a series of six meetings of members chosen from the congregation to conduct a project study on the ministry and mission of the church.
- ii. That the meetings be held on (dates) from (time) to (time).
- iii. That the study, "Can our small membership church continue to survive?" be made a special emphasis in the life of the congregation for this period of time and that everyone is encouraged to participate as asked.

- iv. That the pastor is requested to use the Biblical material as the basis for sermons during the weeks of the project study and that time during the study and during the worship service is given to the committee spokesperson for reporting progress, sharing information, and encouraging participation.
- v. That a group be formed consisting of (names).

2.6 Related Information

The actual study guide is contained in Appendix A of this project. What follows is a brief explanation of the content and use of these worksheets. They are intended to be used in the small membership church where the church appoints a representative group to work through the process. Yet, the formation of the group is not the only task that remains to be considered.

It is important in the use of this study to consider fully first the implications of what it might uncover or expose. I would not recommend it to a pastor in the first year of an appointment. Rather, it will be better utilized by a pastor who is aware of the power dynamics evident; his or her integrity is key to the success of the study.

Another imperative is the confidence of the church in its pastor. The pastor must have the respect and trust of the congregation so that what is being discovered through the process of the study guide can have a strong and important meaning for the life of that church. There must be support from denominational leaders, without higher-ups interfering with the process. Certainly, there should be consultation and communication regarding its use, but outside interference in allowing the project to run its course is not

suggested. When the project is taken out of the hands of the local church pastor, his or her leadership is diminished.

It must be remembered that in the United Methodist Church, the right of the local church to its own destiny is almost absolute. District and conference leaders can counsel and advise, given the implied accountability in the connectional relationship, but ultimately the decision about its fate lies in the hands of the particular local church. This has been my experience serving in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. Any real change as a result of the process can only come through the local church.

The study itself is self-explanatory. It focuses on realizing and reflecting on the biblical basis for what is being asked of the participants. The group will also consider the question, “what is God’s will?” for all that is being done. There should be plenty of allowance for prayer and bible study throughout the process. Without the spiritual component of the study, one runs the risk of being too analytical of the church. There was some attempt to leave out the biblical component as we worked through it in one church for the purpose of saving time. My advice to a church is to make and take all the time needed. The church did not arrive at its present state overnight—extra time will not keep the church from finding its path toward the future.

One other area that needs to be at the forefront of thought and planning is that of communication. I found that it is essential to keep the lines of communication open to all in the church as much as possible. Congregants must deal with facts rather than rumors. The more that rumors can be managed, the greater the chance of the study’s success.

Inherent in consideration of communication is the reality that conflict can and will become a part of the process. Whether intentional or not, the reality is that conflict will

occur as a normal part of the interaction between two or more individuals. As it is understood, conflict is “that condition which always exists when two or more interdependent parties interact. Often it is identified as an apparent incompatibility when it enters the awareness of at least one of the parties.”⁶⁴

For the purpose of this study guide, one must be aware of the potential for conflict to undermine the work being attempted. A good example of this can be found in the book *Leading Churches Through Change*. In the second chapter, there is a case study about the Winchester Charge and the role lived out by its pastor. Its two parties in conflict show how even acts with seemingly good intentions can be prevented from succeeding.⁶⁵

The study is an experience in the life of the church. Pastors can use it and adapt it as it fits their needs. The goal, in the end is how to best answer the question, “Can our small membership church continue to survive?”

2.7 The realities of the study guide

The study guide was created to provide a framework by which the church could begin to ask the questions about its particular existence in an objective light. I attempted to develop this guide as a means by which the two local churches I served could specifically address the issue of their continued survival.

The format of the six meetings came about from the related works I used as resources, as well as suggestions from colleagues as to practicality. It was my feeling that

⁶⁴ Roy W. Pneuman and Margaret E. Bruehl, *Managing Conflict*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), 3.

⁶⁵ Douglas Alan Walrath, *Leading Churches Through Change, Creative Leadership Series* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 33-36.

six meetings were a reasonable commitment for a person. Previously in each of the churches, we had found that this time frame worked well for various bible studies that were attempted.

The specific biblical quotations and subsequent themes for each of the sessions were chosen to reflect issues that I saw the people of the churches engaged in. I chose them on the basis of providing a spark to get each session going and allowing for the constant reflection on what scripture, tradition, reason, and experience teach us in the church. Reactions to the passages were positive and evoked much response, even after the sessions. The one exception to this was in the Landenberg church, where it was suggested we drop the bible study to save time.

The questions used in the study guide came as a result of going through the four major resources I used and compiling a composite list of questions. I then broke these down into similar categories and ultimately used questions related to the topic covered for each session. The intention behind these questions was that they remain open-ended and yet also employ some specific factual information. I also intended that participants prepare at home for the upcoming session. This was done in order to keep the subject fresh in people's minds. There was also a request that each church prayerfully support the effort expended on its behalf.

The actual use in each church was the same in terms of format and planning. Initially, the Staff-Parish Relations Committee met at my request to consider the proposed study guide process. It was their opinion that because of dynamics present in the history of each church, that the only possible chance of success lay in handling the study guide separately for each situation.

Following this discussion, each Administrative Council approved the prospect of the process, and therein was laid the foundation of accountability for what would be done. The entire study guide, as found in this project, was the one used in each setting. My intention was that it be uniform and consistent to test it in two settings. Also, because of the close relation of the Avondale church and the Chatham Church, any attempt at doing something different might send the wrong message to parishioners.

What I experienced was that there was much comparing of notes between the three churches; even though the process was conducted in different time spans, the results of each session were checked to see what the others came up with at that respective point. I found that the first three sessions proved to be the most popular in terms of content and discussion. As we moved into the latter sessions, more of a sense of “what’s the use?” seemed to creep into the discussions. It was also about this point that people would be fully reacting against any hint of closing the church.

My strategy was to complete all six sessions before allowing anyone to cut short the process with a prophecy of doom. I found that I had to work constantly to keep the groups focused on the totality of the project, not just on one aspect that had come up. Also, I worked to remind them that our purpose as a study group was to gather information and insights and not predict final verdicts. That particular step, the action phase of “what next?” could only be addressed within the confines of the Administrative Council. It was a struggle, but I have the sense the process was, and is still, valid and workable, accounting for group dynamics.

There are two other areas worth mentioning at this juncture. The first involves the role of the District Superintendent. In my case, I shared the materials I was using with my

superintendent as well as the results from each church as they were arrived at. As each church completed its work and got to the stage of reporting its efforts back to the Administrative body of that setting, the superintendent would either come to that meeting or send word to me about what actions he would not allow. I found that this level of interference gave the impression of second-guessing to the work of the committee that had gone through the study guide process. It also allowed critics of the process an arena to voice their feelings that the project was a “waste of time.” Finally, it left me feeling frustrated because his interference did not, in my opinion, reflect the reality of what was needed and necessary in a particular setting. I felt this most keenly when he offered his view on what he saw as the “only option” open to a church.

I realize that when one looks at the ideal setup of the Church and the relationship between pastor and superintendent, that this is not how life in the parish should sound. Without disrespect, this reality, as I have outlined it, characterized my pastorate in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. Colleagues have since told me that this type of dynamic should not exist, yet they did and were part of why the project arrived where it did.

The second area pertains to the study guide’s implications for a church in a multiple church charge. It became evident in my case that, whatever any one church decided, it would have a ripple effect on the others related to it through the charge structure. For one church to move to a part-time pastorate meant that the others were faced with the option of going along with that decision or picking up the difference in salary and support to maintain what they had been accustomed to. In the case of Avondale church and Chatham church, they had no parsonage to be concerned with, so

all they would be losing would be responsibilities to pay for a share in one. In the case of Landenberg church, they were left with a parsonage and expenses they could not bear alone. Thus, future use of the study guide process must proceed with sensitivity in the charge setting.

Chapter 4. Evaluation and Implications

1. Evaluation of the process in each church setting

“...consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.” (James 1:2-8, NRSV)

This passage of Scripture from James provided the focus of the discussion for my introduction of the study to each of the three church Councils. My rationale in sharing this was to focus on our need to ask God for the wisdom to look at each of our church situations and help us find an answer to the questions we raised. In this chapter, I will outline the significant events in the life of each church as it worked through the stages of the project. For the sake of clarity, I will separate this account into two sections. The first will deal with the experiences of Avondale and Chatham. Since their existence is linked, it would prove repetitious to separate their experiences. The second is the account of the Landenberg Church.

1.1 The Avondale church and Chatham church Experience

As I readied myself for the implementation of the project schedule and presenting the idea to each church leadership team and then to the full council, I was asked to schedule a Staff-Parish Relations Committee meeting for September 19th. This request came from our district superintendent, who wanted to touch base with the churches before the Charge Conference scheduled for early November. He set the agenda for the meeting; he wanted to discuss the issues about each church in terms of their future. He

alluded to several factors that he was aware were affecting us: (1) there had not been any real interaction between the Landenberg Church and the Avondale and Chatham Churches; (2) each church was dealing with declining financial support and lack of member involvement or support; (3) there are morale problems in each of the churches; (4) there had been many inconsistencies with meeting the salary payments to the pastor on time; and (5) he wanted to raise the question, “Are we heading into the best possible direction to allow the church to function?”

The discussion that followed was, for the most part of concern to the Landenberg people. For the Avondale church and Chatham church, what came out of this meeting was a strong desire to take a serious look at the continuance of the relationship with Landenberg church. Both these churches had had a part-time pastor their entire history before joining Landenberg in 2016. The question was raised by the folks of Avondale and Chatham, “Would we be better off without them?”

After much discussion, one member of the Avondale church asked, “why do we have to stay on with Landenberg?” The District Superintendent responded by saying, “The decision and direction you go involves trade-offs. There are not many people in the area that can give you quality time of leadership on a part-time basis. It will be so difficult to find the part-time person.” At this point, the six representatives of the Avondale church and Chatham church talked among themselves and requested that he work out the split from Landenberg church.

In late September of 2018, I sat down on two separate occasions to meet with the chairperson of the Chatham Administrative Council and discussed the project. Her initial reaction was, “It’s a good idea, but do we really have to spend so much time at it?” I

suggested that it deserved at least a try in light of concerns I had been hearing for some time about the future of the church. We agreed that I would present it at the next scheduled Council meeting, which was set for November 8.

It was early October before I got an opportunity to talk with the chairperson of the Avondale Task Force about the project for that church. He was enthusiastic about it and felt that it would address the problem facing the church, which he described as the worn-out, tired feeling he and the other four families felt in trying to keep our church going with no help from anyone else. We agreed that I would present the idea at the next scheduled meeting on October 10.

The Avondale Task Force, which is comprised of six people, all volunteered to become the study group, and meeting dates were established throughout November and December. We agreed to meet in the church at 7 p.m. and adjourn no later than 9 p.m. Each person volunteered to bring refreshments.

Meanwhile, the Chatham church Administrative Council did not meet until early November. The seven people who regularly attend these meetings in the home of one of the members all agreed to give it a try. Their reservations derived from having been through countless types of programs over the years to help the church grow—all of which produced no tangible results. Their study group meetings were set throughout December with a planned break for the Christmas Choir Concert and the holidays.

The Avondale Study group met faithfully and enthusiastically for each of the six sessions. There was a great deal of honest sharing and soul-searching as they began to wrestle with the reality of being able to keep their church open. However, members expressed strong emotions about not wanting the church to close. The exercises and the

work done in preparation for each session suggested otherwise to them. The reality that there were two options facing the church—either close it and have the members go elsewhere, or approach Chatham about the necessity of a merger for both to survive. As one participant stated, “In this day and age, it is stupid to have two Methodist churches within spittin’ distance of each other!” The outcome of the sixth session was to contemplate the study’s insights for a few days and make a decision at the Task Force meeting scheduled for December 17. This would give everyone a week to reflect and pray on the issues.

The Chatham Study Group met for its first two sessions in early December. It was difficult to get the group working on the task at hand because of concern over what they had heard out of the Avondale meetings. The rumors ranged from “I hear they’re going to sell the church to the Baptists,” to “I hear they want us to close our church and join them.” Rumors would prove the greatest obstacle I had to contend with throughout the project. They were frustrating to deal with because I had no control over them, and as I would soon discover, it would undermine the group’s effort.

On December 17, 2018, the Avondale Church voted to contact the Chatham church and see if they would be interested in discussing a merger. Two days later, in response to sides being drawn up over the rumors that were flying wild now and drawing flames rather than sparks, the Avondale Task Force, meeting without me, decided to send a letter which said:

Dear Chatham United Methodist Church,

At a recent Avondale task force meeting, the future of our church was discussed in detail. The following decision was made:

We will continue to worship at the Avondale Church for twelve months a year with a part-time minister. We are inviting you, the congregation of the Chatham Church, to worship with us. Should you decided to do so, the plate of each collection will continue to be divided on a 6-month basis.

This decision was met after realizing the facilities available at the Avondale church such as kitchen, nurse's office or Sunday school area, and rest rooms are more desirable for our needs. We also noted the increase of attendance at the Avondale church, which benefits both churches.

We want our congregation to grow and see this as the only possible way.

Sincerely,

The Avondale UMC Task Force

I cannot remember a time in ten years of ministry that I spent as many hours on the phone and meeting with people to resolve a crisis. All of my efforts were in vain, for the culmination of all this was a reply to Avondale from Chatham dated December 21 indicating their desire to go their own way after April 1 (which was the projected date to move back down to the Chatham church anyway). It also noted that any other joint ventures, save worship, were off, and I was informed that the study group would no longer meet.

It was a frustration to try to resolve a conflict in a community between two churches of which I was the pastor, especially when I did not live in the community. I felt, for the first time, the distance of the miles and my inability to become a part of these people's lives. Over the course of the next month, I called and visited all the principals in the drama. My purpose was to try to resurrect the project and convince them that without some sort of intervention on their behalf, the churches could very well close altogether. I know in my heart that if anything would come out of this action, it would be with the

help of God's Spirit. I saw this come to fruition when suddenly a sense of reason came to prevail upon the whole situation.

On January 6, 2019, the study groups from each of the two churches met together. It was agreed to try again and name a new study group composed of three persons from each church. The emphasis at this point was in putting younger people (age 25-40) on the study group so that they might have a say in their future. The first meeting was set for February 6 in order that tempers might be given a chance to cool off. In the meantime, all concerned agreed to talk up the positive, necessary aspects of this procedure to cut down on rumors. It was noted at this point that most rumors were being perpetuated by three individuals who did not even belong to the church. I called on all three to enlist their support in letting the process run its course and requested that they not unduly influence its outcome.

The first and last meeting of the combined study group was held on February 6. At this meeting, as we began the process from session one, it was agreed that the merger was the only possible outcome we could arrive at. It was also agreed that neither church would give up its building—and that the Chatham church had the problem of no plumbing or water. Since these persons were all the children of others in the two churches, they were certain that there was no sense in proceedings given the present circumstance. Thus, they agreed to stop the process before any more blood was shed and people left the church. We had lost five people during the process to date.

At this point, I contacted the District Superintendent to request a meeting to bring him up to date on the situation in the church. His feeling was that we needed to hold

meetings with each of the churches' Staff-Parish Relations Committee members to get a reading on how best to proceed.

On February 16, the first meeting was held with the Avondale representatives. The agenda was quickly set when the members present announced that a poll had been taken among the five member-families who supported the church and their feeling was to close the Avondale church as of April 1, 2019.

Based on the study's findings, the families had been discussing two possible scenarios among themselves. It came down to closing the church for a time with the possibility of reopening at a later date or closing the church, rather than postponing the inevitable. The District Superintendent settled the question by stating he wanted them to make a clean cut and move on—so he opted for closure.

The question became how to send out a clear signal to the people that the Avondale Church was going to close. A plan was agreed upon whereby a Church Conference would be called on March 17 to consider the following motion:

“There will be a Church Conference held at the Avondale Church at 7 pm on March 17, 2019, to discuss the proposal made by the Staff-Parish Relations Committee that the membership of the Avondale United Methodist church declares that the Avondale United Methodist Church be discontinued effectively on April 1, 2019, per Paragraph 2549 of the 2016 Book of Discipline so that the Board of Trustees be authorized to take the necessary abandonment steps in consultation with the District Superintendent and the Annual Conference Board of Trustees.”

It should be noted that the conference was held to determine the continued viability of ministry in this church. It would be an opportunity to discuss an issue that had been very much a part of the struggle of those who have been active in the life of the church for at least the three years I had served as a pastor: “Can our church survive in the Avondale community?” Over the length of my pastorate, we had tip-toed around the

issues of what exactly are the ministries and mission of this particular church if it were not there. A central part of the struggle was that God had had a reason for the church's existence throughout its duration. The determination became clear when we realized that as we have struggled with the "why" of God's plan and purpose for this church, what dawned on us was that, apart from some very strong emotional ties, we had not been able to come up with a single reason for our being here. Perhaps later, we might be able to uncover such a reason, but the consensus was that this would not happen, at least for the present moment.

Meanwhile, in other churches, the members of their Staff-Parish Relations Committee met immediately following the Avondale meeting. The District Superintendent informed them of Avondale's intention to close as of April 1 and assured them that I would remain as their pastor until July 1, 2019. The purpose of the meeting then became sharing expectations about what the new pastor should or should not be. Since these discussions typically do not concern the present pastor, I was invited to leave.

On March 18, a crowd of thirty-seven people attended the church conference in Avondale. After a roll call of voting members of the Avondale Church was taken, it was discovered that of this group six were members of the church, twelve were members of the Chatham Church who came to see what would happen, and the remainder consisted of former members who had moved away and now lived in other communities and attend other churches.

At this meeting, former members offered lengthy testimony consisting in expressing disappointment at the prospect of driving through town and seeing the church closed. The members present tried in vain to say how tired they were and felt they

couldn't go on supporting the church much longer, but this basically fell on deaf ears.

The District Superintendent was about to call for a vote on the motion when the Chatham representatives asked for voice privilege. It was granted and they asked if Avondale would be willing to merge with them.

Perhaps the stunning silence had its greatest participant in me as the pastor. I had to look around to make sure I heard correctly. The District Superintendent, sensing the opportunity, quickly set a meeting date of April 1, 2019, at 7:30 p.m. in the Avondale Church to have a joint Church conference to vote on the proposal to merge.

It has literally been "easy sledding" since then. After months of trying to study this issue and working through it, the meeting on April 1 was over in 15 minutes with a unanimous vote of the twenty-seven present to merge. Though it was called a merger, it seemed that Chatham essentially absorbed the Avondale church. The formal vote of the new church was taken but the Chatham name remained.

1.2 The Landenberg Church Experience

One of the difficulties facing the pastor of the Landenberg Church is that there exists a genuine spirit of apathy regarding persons in the church holding actual leadership positions. It is not uncommon for the person who was cajoled into serving as chairperson of the Administrative Council to not bother to even show up for a meeting or warn you of his or her intended absence at an upcoming meeting. Thus it usually fell to me by default, against my objections, to sit in the leadership chair and conduct most of its Council meetings. I decided to present the project at the September 10, 2018, Administrative Council meeting. That night there were in attendance the usual five persons who come to church, hold positions, and wonder aloud if anything is ever going to change. They were

all skeptical, to say the least, about the need for the project and seemed to resent the implication that the church's survival was in question.

This was one of several junctions where I paused and attempted to deal with the conflict I saw developing. I attempted to list for the group the pros and cons regarding the study. It became clear, after we had first listed out the negatives, that there were more reasons to go ahead than to stop. My concern was that we all agreed before proceeding so that conflict would not develop later on.

The Treasurer carried the argument, favoring trying it as a basis of coming up with a more comprehensive financial campaign for November. I explained that this was not the purpose of the project, but rather, it might highlight ways we, as the church, should and could be in ministry to the community. After much discussion, it was agreed to set the six meeting dates, and I was to find six people who might be interested in helping me with it. We selected dates in November and December.

I immediately tried to enlist the support of the church's matriarch,⁶⁶ the person whose family, for all intents and purposes, ran the church. She informed me that it was a waste of time and suggested I call on people instead. I then tried to line up other people that I saw as being keys to the dynamics of power and decision-making in the life of the church. Each turned me down out of fear of upsetting "Aunt Eloise". Thus, I put the project on hold for the time being.

⁶⁶ According to *Effective Small Churches*, Carl Dudley describes that "The patriarchs and matriarchs are at the center of the church. They sit in the center of the sanctuary, and they feel in the center of the congregation. They may have wealth and be involved in many activities, or they may have passed their prime. They may be friendly, or aloof. . . .They may no longer sit on the official boards of the church. But they have one essential feature: patriarchs and matriarchs have lived through the historical moments of the church. In their presence, they carry the identity of the church. They remember when things were different, 'and how we got to where we are.'" (51-52)

On September 30, after consulting with the District Superintendent, it was agreed to have a Charge Conference for the purpose of assessing the continued ministry of the Landenberg Church. This, I felt, was necessary to try to get things off the ground in this church. The only on-going activity in the life of the church was Sunday worship, and that was attended by twenty to twenty-five people. Our budget was \$48,000, and we were not making ends meet, even with the Conference Equitable Compensation share of 40% of my salary from just this church.

There were ten persons present for the Charge Conference, and much of the meeting was spent denying the reality of what was happening. To the question of what parishioners tell others about their church, the response, “Nothing...there’s nothing going on,” was telling. What then followed was the sharing of the external factors affecting the church (loss of farming community and loss of identity for the town) and the internal factors (one family running church and pastor, loss of enthusiasm, burn-out in jobs, too few do too much, no increase in giving to the church in light of the farm economy), all of which set the tone.

Discussion turned to the impression we as a church gave outsiders. The District Superintendent cautioned that the problem was not solved just by having enough money to meet expenses. He suggested the problem had to do with their own understanding of self, church, and community. He then strongly suggested that my project might be the very thing to get things off the ground.

Thus, it was decided that a group of eight people would meet to work through the study. The original dates set were resurrected, and the “Landenberg Church Survival Task Force” was born. I suspect that the reason it did was the reality of losing support

from Avondale and Chatham after July. This would necessitate Landenberg's going part-time, with no other choice save raising the monies to support a full-time ministry. This was agreed to be preferable to trying the full-time route and failing in full view of everyone around us.

The task force met three times and then quit the study because of a growing sense of futility over trying to change things apart from "Aunt Eloise". I must give this group of persons great credit; they hung in there while she used every trick in the book to undermine their efforts and take away the sense of accomplishment they enjoyed. She persisted, despite my exchanges with her (that grew more heated as I became more frustrated); and the counsel of the District Superintendent telling her to let it run its course. Each of the members of the task force, notably, has since left Landenberg to worship in another environment.

Allow me to point out here that the conflict that had developed between Aunt Eloise and myself was not the only reason that the task force failed. I had allowed myself to choose members of the group who would have no authority to enact any of the insights we uncovered that might save the church. Another dynamic was that Eloise never, at any point, was willing to concede that a viewpoint other than her own was valid. It became a study in the escalation of conflict, rather than working toward common goals that would ultimately stop the process.

What was left was to try to conduct the remainder of the work at Administrative Council meetings. This was a good idea until Aunt Eloise elected herself chairperson one night, with the support of the three members of her family that were on the council and came to the meeting in early January. I could see she meant it when she told me, "Now,

pastor Lee, I'll put an end to this nonsense!" Her outlook was "cancel the pledge, cut off attendance, coerce through committees, create dissension, cover up with clichés, control the curriculum, and close the mind."⁶⁷

I have a great sense of failure over this experience, which I shall analyze in greater depth in the next chapter. Suffice it for me to say, the "family chapel" nature of the Landenberg Church is the very reason that for over forty years, members of the church and community have stopped attending and supporting the church. The building is in dire need of repair, and the ceiling is close to falling in the front of the Sanctuary. Since January, we now have ten to fifteen people in church on Sunday, and there has been no music since February when the organist quit. It certainly was no fault of hers; truly, it is not a proper atmosphere for worship.

On May 10, the District Superintendent met with Eloise and the Staff-Parish Relations Committee and informed them I would be leaving as of June 30. When asked about replacement, he informed them a part-time local pastor would come in for services only in the event they could change things or close.

My frustrated mounted over the fact that the church had the opportunity to take responsibility for its future and chose to sit back and do nothing. For years, as people tell it, the members had complained about "one family running the church and the minister." I developed this project so that the Landenberg church might have a better chance to survive. At one point, I felt that, since the Landenberg Church was aware of the work going on in the Avondale Churches, it would realize that every step Avondale and

⁶⁷ Maxie D. Dunnam, Gary J. Herbertson, and Everett L. Shostrom, *The Manipulator and the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968), 61-63.

Chatham took forward meant the reality they would leave the relationship with Landenberg. Still, they did nothing. And, perhaps, that is what will one day be left.

2. The Implication for the future in each local church

Lyle Schaller made the following observation:

“If the trend that developed between these years continues, and if no new force comes into play to modify this trend, thus and so will happen. ...by 1985, all but a few hundred farmers will have disappeared from the American scene.⁶⁸ ...Every mother with a child under the age of 18 will be employed outside the home.”⁶⁹... The nature and characteristics of the American family are changing.⁷⁰...The agriculturally oriented rural community of yesterday is being supplanted by a new community that is rural in terms of appearance, population, density, and scale, but that has a strong urban orientation in terms of employment, culture, values and communication.⁷¹ ...Change and social progress will continue to produce a demand for additional changes, a re-ordering of priorities, and a redefinition of the goals.”⁷²

Certainly, Schaller’s observations are applicable to the present, and future, status of the three churches addressed in this project. If the goal of the church, according to Niebuhr, is “the increase among human beings of the love of God and neighbor,”⁷³ then these three churches have all the more reason to want to continue to survive and grow. To address the primary task as it is understood in each setting provides all the agenda for ministry and mission for which one could ask. The qualifying factor will be their ability to come together as a church in their respective community and agree on the primary task for their community.

⁶⁸ Lyle E. Schaller, *Impact of the Future*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 11.

⁶⁹ Lyle E. Schaller, *Impact of the Future*, 12.

⁷⁰ Lyle E. Schaller, *Impact of the Future*, 42.

⁷¹ Lyle E. Schaller, *Impact of the Future*, 150.

⁷² Lyle E. Schaller, *Impact of the Future*, 205.

⁷³ Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), P. 106, quoting H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministries* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 28.

The major point of contention for each of these churches is coming to terms with its own theological understanding of who it is. Despite the attempts at working through the study, there still remains the need to realize that by doing and being a part of such a process, it will uncover who it is as a church of Jesus Christ in mission and ministry to its community and world. In the words of Browne Barr, “the dilemma demands that the church come to terms with the fact that its nature is defined not in its “doing” but in its “being” and its “being” is to be filled with the Spirit, glorifying and enjoying God....”⁷⁴

Many churches’ best course of action would be to stop trying to offer every activity (youth group, Sunday school, Vacation Church School, etc.) with their limited numbers and instead concentrate on improving the Sunday morning worship experience. Though corporate worship is not dependent upon numbers, there is a greater potential for success in the life of each church if this one area were a focus. This is the one main contact that people will have with these churches that doesn’t demand support numbers. In the case of Landenberg, the number one priority should be finding an organist or pianist to play on Sunday mornings. They might also clean up the sanctuary to give an impression of good stewardship and care for those who happen in its doors. If the people demonstrate an attitude of caring about the church they have been privileged to support and uphold, that attitude will, in turn, be conveyed to others.

One other concern I have for the Landenberg church is that of either managing the present power structure or compromising on the issues of change. As it is, the past thirty-plus years of the church and pastor being run by one family have taken a destructive toll. Too many people in the community are aware of this dynamic and will not attend or

⁷⁴ Browne Barr, *High-Flying Geese*, (Minnesota: Seabury Press, 1983), 13.

participate for fear of being caught in the middle. Many have been hurt by allowing themselves to really like a pastor and then find that two or three have forced that person to leave over frustration with the dynamics in the church.

Perhaps the arrival of a part-time, non-resident retired pastor will either make or break the church's struggles over continued survival. As things stand now, I foresee the church closing by January if some radical steps are not taken. However, knowing the point of the District Superintendent, including, perhaps, the desire not to have a church close during his tenure, I fear the good people of Landenberg will fail and give up on their own. Certainly, they need not fear intervention from the Bishop or his cabinet.

I have a much better feeling about the Chatham church as it looks toward the future. It has hired a part-time pastor who is currently on a leave of absence from the conference to be with them for at least one year. It has indicated that he is to have the priorities of (1) worship; (2) visitation of members and shut-ins; and (3) leading the new church through the study I provided.

Chatham anticipates continuing the study to take a good hard look at who they are and what they are called to do in the name of Christ and be intentional about their primary task. During the course of this next year, they will have many decisions to face again, many of which caused the breakdown in the process the previous year. Yet they feel that if they are certain who they are, since their faith tells them whose they are, none of these will be an impossible task.

One of the strong memories I have of the folks in Avondale is their ability to rely on their strong faith convictions to guide them through even the darkest moments. In the course of struggling many years with a part-time and non-resident pastor, they have

endured. I know they will survive, despite a lack of help and support from either the conference or the denomination, because they feel strongly about the importance of their faith community.

The people of Avondale and Chatham are excited about their new venture in faith. Realistically, they know that their new venture will not likely attract new people or get the unchurched back in. But at least they have done what they felt was ultimately best. It will be due to convictions such as these that they will survive.

The story of the Avondale, Chatham, and Landenberg United Methodist churches has now been told. In Schaller's words, "it is time to consider what can be learned from this history in regard to the future."⁷⁵ What is to be learned will certainly, in most instances, depend on the perspective from which one approaches the quest for learning.

In the Biblical sense, we can trust that our God works in history in ways, at best, only partially known to us through a combination of promises kept and surprises given. The key is in understanding the place God has in the life of the church, and in turn, how the church understands its primary task and its responsibility to God in carrying that out through ministry and mission.

In the historical sense, we are part of a heritage that prides itself on discovering sparks and flames that will keep one's heart warm—especially in response to God. If history is to repeat itself, then perhaps the history of the churches will evoke the response of some new John Wesley to speak out and foster change.

In terms of the denomination, I believe that we, who are in the small membership church, must advocate a change in the appointment system whereby churches are sent

⁷⁵ Lyle E. Schaller, *Impact of the Future*, 13.

quality pastors whose salaries are subsidized by the Conference. Those of us who are the laborers in these particular vineyards of the Lord need a tremendous amount of support from leaders. We certainly do not get the recognition, nor do our churches, that the pastor of the suburban church gets. And the denomination must produce legislation that will give it the power to close the so-called family chapels, if that is what is best for all concerned. It calls for courage and conviction to deal with the struggles to survive and live in the small membership church.

For my part, in a few short weeks, I will leave people with whom I have grown to experience, in many ways, warm affection, stubborn respect, anger and frustration, and understanding. We have, at times, each brought out the best and the worst in each other. We have made mistakes apart and together as we each tried to do what we felt was best in the eyes of God. It is my prayer that if there be any differences still among us, we may at least part as Christians in the unity of the Spirit. I will go on to another church and will leave them to follow the path they have chosen. I am certain that each of us has grown and learned from the experiences shared. It is my hope that the conflicts and troubles shared might not overshadow the glory of our Lord as we work to be his church.

May God be with us all in the uncertainty of tomorrow and help us all to survive in faith and love.

Conclusion

In his book, *And Are We Yet Alive?*, Bishop Wilke makes the observation:

“Years ago, one of our most able administrators, Bishop Williams C. Martin, accurately observed that there were many signs of alive congregations, but the one uniform signal, across the board, of a consistently alive, vibrant, and growing church was the strength of its church school attendance.

The decline in our church school began in 1960 and has continues precipitously ever since. Prophets have cried out, ‘Look, look,’ because it is a ‘flag statistic, but except for one brief, momentary pause in 1980, the plunge has continued unabated.

In 1960-1964 – 4.2 million. In 1980-1984 – 2.1 million.

Half of our church school is gone! Over two million people are no longer with us. These classes were, to use Lyle Schaller’s phrase, ‘port of entry’ church growth eyes.’ They invited friends and neighbors to come with them to attend their classes. Eventually many experienced the living Christ in their lives and joined the church.”⁷⁶

As I sit down many months after leaving the churches of Avondale, Chatham, and Landenberg, this quote comes back to me from time to time. It recurs in those moments when I think back on all that was a part of the life of the three churches and their respective communities and pray for an understanding of what happened during the course of this project. The reality of their future was sealed in fate’s hands when the church schools closed in each church, and no one cared enough to restart them. They did not just lose half their membership—they lost the lifeblood of the church’s future when no one continued to show up.

Perhaps the handwriting was on the wall for all those years that the churches struggled on after the closing of the church schools. Perhaps the diminishing number of persons attending was related. Perhaps the Spirit was lacking in the life of the churches

⁷⁶ Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?*, 10-11.

when the focus shifted from God to issues of mere survival. Perhaps if they had only reached out for help before it was too late, they might survive. Perhaps the conference should have taken a more active role in preventing the situation from deteriorating to the level it did. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps...

As I sit down to reflect on all that has happened as a result of this project, two emotions come to mind. The first is frustration over the inability of the project and myself, to fully address the issues I raised in a manner that indicates success. The other related to doing things differently given the chance. The project successfully examined the churches' memberships and examined surrounding community support. The process of the study guide was beneficial in exposing where the churches were and also the hidden dynamics behind why they were where they were. But it never, as a whole, got them to the point of looking at the issue of what God's plan was for them or what their own actions/inactions were doing to affect the church's life.

I believe that the work begun in this project needs to be tested several times more in another setting to determine where it came up short. One area where I needed more input was the role that I played as a facilitator in this process. Perhaps we might have been better off if an outside person gathered the data and led us through the process. There is also the chance that person might not have gotten as far as we did.

What I wish to share now is an overview of the experiment, the research involved, the underlying assumptions and hypotheses, the methodology, and what I learned from it, and the places of resistance and human freedom in this project.

My ongoing intention was to devise a vehicle by which one could analyze and interpret the issues of survival as they were lived out in the local church setting. I was

especially concerned with coming to a conclusion with the good people of my three appointed churches over the issue of their future. Although the subject had been talked about over many years, the churches had failed to gather the informative, conclusive data to substantiate a decision either one way or another. The District Superintendent could inform me only as to the question of the church's ability to meet its financial obligation in support of a full-time ministry, or be forced to go to a part time position after the conference commission on Equitable compensation decided to cease funding a portion of the pastor's salary. I felt that what was needed was a way to gather information so that a decision could be made from a basis of strength rather than weakness.

I began to research the issue by inquiring how our denomination was addressing the issue of church survival. What I found was a trail that aimlessly wound all over the place. There was no clear indication by any of our Eastern Pennsylvania Conference or General Church agencies that they cared to address the issue. In conversations with the Bishop of Eastern Pennsylvania conference, I was given the impression that neither knew of any work being done on this issue in the connection. Rather than answers, I was encouraged that if I proceeded with such a project, the various agencies would love to review my efforts.

Thus, I began to search in the seminary libraries for related resources and comb through them for a sense of direction. I lacked any single, clear, definitive source, but rather attempted the project by piecing together bits and pieces of gathered information. I found also that some of my colleagues in different denominations could put me in touch with persons who had attempted similar projects. Their help provides a direction in which

I could wander and pursue information relative to developing a specific instrument for use in the churches that would meet the needs of my particular situation.

The difficult part began when I tried to bring up the subject of what I was doing through the project with the people in the churches. Much of what I was conceiving was very much in the realm of the head, while their perceptions were related to the heart. I made the mistake of ignoring the warning to reduce their faith and corporate lives to paper. While I was trying to devise ways in which I could analyze and verify factual information, the people were struggling with the greater unknowns of their faith as it related to the churches' survival.

Despite this, I proceeded on the assumption that this project was in the best interests of each church and was the key to its continued survival. As I look back now, I fear I approached the whole matter with the assumption that only the Chatham Church had a chance of surviving. Beyond that particular setting, I felt that perhaps it was better to let the other two die the death I felt had too long been postponed. I based my admittedly subjective assumption on the lack of commitment I saw evidenced in the corporate lives of these two churches.

At this point in the project, my time was divided. First, there was the gathering of information through the "Parish Religious Interview." The reason for this was that I might get firsthand information from the people and be able to hear their perspectives on the issues each church was facing. Second, I would be involved with research and putting together the study guide process.

The study guide process came about as a result of finding the instruments that were used in various settings to evaluate a church, its program, or its ministry. Having

read, digested, and talked with persons who had used each of the resources, I settled on the four that ultimately formed the core of my study guide.

One of my major concerns in drafting the study guide was to provide an arena of constant reflection between the biblical understandings of ministry in each church alongside the practical aspect of its present reality. My aim was to make this as non-threatening as possible. While it appeared to me an excellent resource to use, it appeared to the people as a waste of time, a nice exercise but lacking substance, action, or an answer to the current problem.

I found in the course of the project and study guide that there were key phrases that either should have been better explained or left out. Key words, such as problem, confrontation, concern, dilemma, and closing seemed to imply a negative connotation to people. What I saw as arenas for discussion, people heard as implying a negative attitude. Thus, we became bogged down in the terminology rather than the process itself.

One factor that relates to the overall content of what I have raised is that of the dynamics of each church community. I approached the project with the assumption, based on conversations with key leaders, that the people were united in their admission of the relative seriousness of the dilemma. I also assumed that the church people would be united in the common goal of finding a solution to the problem. I felt that a cause/effect approach would be best. What I misinterpreted were personal dynamics. Instead of overall church loyalty, what was experienced was unresolved inter-personal and inter-family conflict. Common sense was not always the deciding factor, but rather the dictates of the person who held the most power in the church. Another realization that I made was that the person in power was not always the one who held the titled position.

I found church dynamics to be the most unsettling factor I dealt with in the process of the project. It seemed to me that the church should be above this sort of game playing. Granted that the church is in many ways no different from other institutions, but my thinking was that it should be different in terms of the way its members acted out their intentions. I felt that the church existed in a realm separate from, yet a part of, the world about it. Socially, this meant that people came into the church to find meaning and direction for their lives and then returned to the world with a clearer perspective of what it meant to be a Christian. Perhaps this was the area of my greatest disappointment—that of how my thinking about the nature of the church differed from the reality.

I continued through the project, even as I realized that my methodologies were off target. My thinking at this point was that it would be only in carrying out the whole project that I would be able to reflect on what went wrong. Thus, I completed the schedule of study guide meetings and the resulting other meetings.

As I considered the issue of the small membership church in this research, I paused to reflect on the role of the District Superintendent and the leaders of each of the churches. While I looked to each to gain perspective and receive objective criticism for my efforts, instead I experienced their concern for their own positions. I was amazed, and still am, that church leaders would allow three struggling churches to hurt just to keep church closure off one's record. Pastors seem to want superintendents to be administrators, but in my particular case, the superintendent's authority could not solve the ongoing problem of the church's survival. The solution of going to a lesser salaried position for each church still does not agree with me. There is something in me that says the role taken toward the church should have been much firmer.

I encouraged denominational leadership that pastors and churches have to live with the problem, not leaders. Given the constraints of the appointment system, the reality of the small membership church is that the pastor will not be there more than two or three years. Leaders will assess a situation and agree to a change in principle, yet, when the time comes for the votes to be counted, it is no surprise that denominational leaders would side with the powerful factions and not the pastor.

There is something in me that says that the role of the pastor should be stronger. Perhaps I do need more schooling in church politics, as some of my colleagues have lovingly suggested. What I am left with though, is the feeling that I needed to take responsibility for motivating a response on the part of the people but was powerless to effect it. I found that I had to hold my over-anxious enthusiasm and penchant for blunt observations in check to survive the project. Therein lies a learning opportunity for pastors: perhaps my assumptions and outlook were wrong as I approached the project. Perhaps I did not know the community, the people, and the church as well as I thought I did. While there was some success in what we accomplished, there was also regret for what could never be. At last, though, the solution for the future was already fixed in the attitudes of the people long before I began.

In the course of evaluating the results of this project, I fear that the one component that was left out was that of the evaluation instrument. My original intention was to evaluate the process some six months after the completion of the study guide. I had felt there would have been enough time away from the process to allow for objective observations. With the reality of my changing appointments immediately following the process in the churches, there was not adequate time to put this into effect.

In the future, there needs to be a clearer emphasis at the outset on the need for total involvement in the process by the entire church body. I was mistaken in attempting the project alone after others refused to take part. Thus, it was an exercise in futility on my part, not ever fully supported by the church or my superintendent.

One other area that needs to be developed and introduced into the study guide is that of the nature and role of conflict in the church. I can see that a session or two devoted to this issue early on in the process would have greatly contributed to an understanding of what the church is. Toward this end, the work done in Roy Pneuman's and Margaret Bruehl's *Managing Conflict*, would suggest a framework for these components.

This project has been a tremendous learning experience for me as a pastor. It has raised my understanding of the nature of the church to new levels. Next time, I will be more aware of many of the facets I overlooked in this original attempt. The learnings and insights gained from working through the writing of the project have also greatly assisted me in my understanding of what happened in these churches. I will long remember the experience and reflect on its meanings.

Can our small membership church continue to survive? The only answer that I can give is that yes, it can... if pastors and churches trust in God and let his will be done through the local church's ministry and mission. As John Benton writes, "The real problems in churches are to do with a lack of life and of fruitfulness, not the fact that it is a little flock."⁷⁷ The evidence of the grace of God does not depend on numbers. The

⁷⁷ John Benton, *The big picture for small churches - and large ones, too!* (New York: Evangelical Press, 2005), 21.

church is a precious creation. Let us not destroy it by our inaction and inattentiveness. Let us help it to grow and live!

Appendix A

Can our small membership church continue to survive?

A study guide to help with the decision

How this project is set up

This project study calls for six weekly meetings, each lasting about two hours. Six weeks seems to be a reasonable amount of time for persons to give when they consider the importance of the issue at hand, and it allows them time to do some worthwhile work. The study is best done when it is a major emphasis in the congregation's life for those six weeks.

The group is made up of members chosen by the pastor in consultation with the church Lay Leader and Administrative Council Chairperson. There will be no more than ten and no fewer than six members of each study group. Group members will agree before starting the study to commit themselves to the totality of the project and to attend all meetings.

There is individual preparation that will need to be done in advance of each meeting. This will be concerned mostly with Bible study and reflection. Each person will be given the appropriate handouts about the task of each meeting.

The group activity in each meeting is the heart of the project study. Sharing information and insights regarding what the Bible has to say about the congregational mission and celebrating the life God sends offers energy and vitality. This is especially true when people begin to develop a shared understanding of who they are as the church of Jesus Christ. This will be balanced with discussions about the local church's activities. Combined, the two will provide a sounding board for each other.

It is better not to plan meals in connection with weekly meetings. Preparing for meals and cleaning up takes too much time away from what the meeting is called to do. Neither are there any coffee breaks allowed for in the design. Instead, light refreshments

might be available all during each meeting. A relaxed, informal, enjoyable atmosphere is important, something smaller congregations do well, regardless.

The Sunday morning worship service holds several possibilities related to this project study:

1. The Bible selections provide a good basis for sermons and themes for worship during the project study.
2. Time is set aside for an update on the committee's work during the sharing of joys and concerns of the community.
3. During the study, prayer support from the congregation is requested each week.

Leadership for this Project Study

The pastor will lead the study. The group will be approved by the Administrative Council before its beginning the project. The group will elect or appoint a spokesperson to report to the congregation each week. An appointed recording secretary will keep track of pertinent points covered each week to help in the review process the following week.

The role of the pastor is crucial. She/he is to be primarily responsible for conducting the meetings. The role of the pastor is to provide support and encouragement as well as specific directions. The pastor needs to make every effort—and the group members will need help in this—to avoid giving answers or determining the outcome of the group's work.

How to get started

The steps to initiate the study might take shape as follows:

1) Some persons will need to sense the obvious benefits of this project before they begin. There are perhaps several times in a church's life that this would be appropriate, hopefully not just when it is facing the decision to close or remain open. These situations might include: an impending pastoral change of appointment; when a new pastor has arrived to acquaint him/her with the nature of this particular congregation and its community; when pastors feel the need for congregational renewal; or when pastors and churches are looking for a meaningful and significant total church program for perhaps an annual planning retreat. The study offers a means to open pastors and parishioners' lives to Biblical insights, to other persons who are a part of the congregation, to the community, and, most importantly, to God's Spirit.

2) Those sensing the benefits of involvement in this project will recommend to the Administrative Council that a committee consisting of the pastor, lay leaders, and Administrative Council chairperson review the study in its entirety and report back to the Council about whether or not the project study should be undertaken.

3) A positive recommendation to the Administrative Council by this committee might be:

- i. That the Council approves a series of six meetings of members chosen from the congregation in order to conduct a study on the ministry and mission of the church.
- ii. That the meeting be held on (date) from (time) to (time)

- iii. That the project study "Can our small membership church continue to survive?" be made a special emphasis in the life of the congregation for this period of time and that everyone is encouraged to participate as asked.
- iv. That the pastor is requested to use the Biblical material in the project study as the basis for sermons during the weeks of the project study and that time during the worship service be given to the committee spokesperson for reporting progress, sharing information, and encouraging participation.
- v. That a group is formed consisting of (names).

Session 1: Knowing Who We Are

Preparation

Knowing one's identity is an important part of accomplishing anything. The stories of Jesus' baptism and his temptation in the wilderness, which preceded his ministry, show him getting a better understanding of who he was. Identity was important to his mission.

In most places, when people are to work together on a project, they often begin with exercises that help them get to know each other. Who we are is an important part of understanding that which we do. Identity is, and always has been, important for successful action.

Your preparation for this project study begins with two different ways of getting to know who you are as a congregation.

Recollections and Remembrances

Recall the most significant event in the life of our church since you have been a member. Write down the details as you remember them.

List the special or traditional things that our church does each year. These may be events, fundraisers, special worship opportunities, etc.

Bible Study

Read Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

What does the passage say to you about who you are?

What reason is given for your being what you are?

Read 1 Peter 2:9-10

What is God's purpose in choosing you to be what you are?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 as if it had been written to our church.

What are some of the "worldly" standards that might cause a congregation to view itself with pride?

What does this statement of Paul say is a Christian congregation's true source of pride?

Which is in a better position to recognize the source of its wisdom, power, calling, or source of boasting: a smaller congregation or a larger one? Why do you think so?

Please be prepared to share your responses at our first meetings.

Session one: Knowing Who We Are

Agenda

Introduction to this session

Bible Study

Sharing of Expectations

Activities:

1) As a group, from your remembrances and the Bible selections, come up with a list of five agreed-upon significant things that can be said about who you are as a congregation.

2) As a group, based on the information you have received in this meeting, complete the following:

We are a congregation of persons who:

If in the next few years, we continue as we have been, we shall probably:

The most important issues facing us now are:

Pastor's sharing

- 1) Census information for our community and county.
- 2) Overview of the meeting of the United Methodist Church as it is in ministry.

Closing worship—Hymn "God of our Life, Through All the Circling Years," prayer.

Session 2 Knowing what we are doing

Preparation For session Two

Every congregation is involved in mission. Some do more; some do less. Some congregations do mission of one kind, others, of another. Worship, education, and a host of other activities are all a part of the church's ministry and mission. In this second session, you will be concerned with what you are currently doing. It's that simple. In preparation for that session, there are two things to do: Bible study and a program review. At the group session, there will be time for you and the others to share insights and information.

Bible Study

Read Mark 10:42-45

What example does Jesus provide to us for our role and function in society?

Read Ephesians 2:8-10

What is the purpose for which you, a Christian, have been made and for which your congregation has been created?

In what ways are you, as a Christian, and your congregation, God's work?

Read Acts 2:41-42, 44-47

List some of the activities that were a part of the early church's life as a congregation:

A Review of your congregation's program

The purpose of this task is to collect information about what our congregation is currently doing. Warning: there are two traps to avoid: (1) wishing that the congregation was doing something, or (2) thinking that because the church did it several years ago, it is still being done. Be honest in your answers.

In the last year, we have done the following things:

These activities used to be a part of our life in the past ten years but no longer are:

These activities should be a part of our church life:

Session Two – Knowing What We Are Doing

Agenda

Bible Study

Review of the previous Session

Activities:

- 1) Sharing reactions to progress so far.
- 2) Combining lists to make one definitive listing for all three categories.
- 3) Discussion

Pastor's sharing: handout of statistical information that will cover number of members, worship attendance, and church school attendance over the last ten years.

Closing worship time: hymn, "He's Got the whole world in His hand."

Session 3 How We Do What We Do

Preparation for session three

Now you are ready to take stock of how our congregation does what it does. When everything goes smoothly, nobody pays much attention to the process of how things are done. People expect things to go well, without trouble, and with a minimum of personal discomfort for the participants. Most of us expect that people will be treated well, that meetings will be organized to get things done, that the arrangements will lead to people being satisfied with what is accomplished. But that is not quite the way things always work out! When there are troubles, we become very much aware of how things are done! Attention to process is something like our attention to personal health: we rarely think of our health when it is good, but when we develop an ache or a pain, or if we should lose the use of a part of our body, we become aware that all is not well! Then we become very much concerned about our health.

Processes in our organizational life—how we do what we do—are matters of vital concern. They determine our effectiveness as a congregation. They also affect how people in the congregation feel about their lives. In preparation for the next session, you will again do some Bible study and take an inventory of how our church congregation functions.

Bible Study

Read John 15:5, 10-17.

What happens to a branch that is cut off the vine?

How is our keeping of Jesus' commandments like the branch's being a part of the vine?

Why does Jesus say, "No longer do I call you servants"?

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12, 14-17, 24-27.

Our congregation—the community of faith—is the body of Christ today, that body in which the ministries of Christ are made real for people. Describe a recent example of what happened to your physical body when one part was injured, or you were ill.

Think of an incident in the life of this church when something troublesome—a severe illness or disappointment or tragedy—happened to someone other than yourself. How did you feel?

List several lessons about our congregation's life that you can learn from the verses selected from 1 Corinthians 12.

Based on the Bible study and what you know about yourself, answer the following question.

1) What is your best occupational skill?

2) What hobby and/or creative skills do you have?

3) As a Christian, how would you like to grow or improve your life?

Session Three – How We Do What We Do

Agenda

Bible Study

Review of the previous session

Activities:

1) List on the whiteboard some different perceptions people have about our church.

2) Discuss: why are/are not human lives becoming better in this community? How might the church become involved in bettering people's lives?

Pastor's sharing—introduce the "Parish Religious Interview" and discuss its implications.

Closing comments/ Sharing

Closing Worship / Prayer

Session 4. Our relationship to the larger community

Preparation for session four

The health and vitality of a congregation depend in part on its relationship to the community around it. Yet, many congregations try to live in isolation. They forget that Christ, who is Lord of the Church, is also Lord of the world. This spiritual amnesia has serious effects: what they say they believe has little or nothing to do with where they spend most of their lives; they are unable to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others or to enlist them in the church's ministry and mission; they may even have contempt for people who have moved into the community. These are just some of the potential problems besetting a church that does not relate creatively to the larger community.

Bible Study

Read John 17:15-18

Sometimes the relationship described here is talked about as the church's being "in the world, but not of the world." What does the phrase "not of the world" mean to you?

Read Matthew 5:13

What are some of the things that salt does?

What do the uses of salt suggest as functions that you and your congregation have in the larger community?

Read Luke 4:18-19

List several things that our congregation needs to be doing as the body of Christ today.

Knowing our community

What is the area for which our church can claim responsibility?

What factors in that area affect our church?

Where do the members of our church come from?

What are the needs of our community? Who are the people in need?

Session Four – Our Relationship to the Larger Community

Agenda

Bible Study

Review of the previous session

Activities:

1) Compile a list of the four components of “knowing our area” and place it on the whiteboard.

2) Come up with an understanding of what we mean by “community” and then relate that to our understanding of “church.”

3) On an enlarged map of the town and surrounding area, place pins to locate where all our members live.

Pastor’s sharing—result of the “Parish Religious Interview”

Discussion and Sharing

Closing worship—Hymn, “Joy to the World”

Session 5 Stating What We Are Going to Do

Preparation for Session Five

Every congregation is involved in ministry and mission. Still, each congregation has its own particular emphasis for its mission, depending upon where it is, who its people are, and what needs to be done. Most congregations benefit from having a commonly held understanding and agreement among their people about who they are and what they will do in mission.

The purpose of the next two sessions is to help you, as a member of the church, develop a better understanding of the church's mission and get some agreement about what the church will be doing in the months and years ahead. To do that, you will be developing a statement of purpose.

That statement of purpose will consist of three-parts: (1) a statement of who you, as the church, are; (2) several sentences about what you intend to do; and (3) a list of activities related to what you intend to do.

The primary activities of Session Five will be to arrive at a group statement of purpose based upon our biblical learnings and using the three-part outline above.

Your preparation will include Bible study and writing about what you think our church intends to do in several areas of mission responsibility.

Bible Study

Read Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

What does the word “vision” in this statement mean to you?

How do you see this verse applying to our church?

Read Philippians 3:13-14

Does what Paul says make sense to you and our congregation today? Why? Why not?

What is important about the “goal” in Paul’s statement? Is it important in itself, or for some other reason? Explain.

Read Luke 9:62

Preparing an outline of your mission design

“We, the members of (name) United Methodist Church, are a congregation of people who both trust and obey Jesus Christ. As such, we are the body that carries on his ministry and mission today. Therefore, we intend to

Here list of what we intend to be doing.

Then, list the activities you feel relate to them.

Session Five – Stating What We Are Going to Do

Agenda

Bible Study

Review of the previous session

Activities: Develop a mission statement and collect responses brought by group members.

Discussion of this statement in light of activities in which we are presently involved.

Pastor's sharing: a discussion of future options open to the church in light of who it is and where it wants to go.

Discussion and Sharing.

Closing Worship: sing "The Doxology."

Session 6. Deciding on What We Want to Do Now

Preparation for Session Six

This next session will be the final one. When it is over, you and others in our congregation should have a better idea of what we want to do in ministry and mission or what we need to do, depending on what we decide. In either case, you will have a sense of what the emphasis on ministry and mission will be in this congregation.

It is important to recognize at this point that you can't do everything at once. None of us functions that way as an individual. At certain times we eat. Sometimes we sleep. At other times we work. Then we play. Personal hygiene is given some time in each day. Normal, healthy life is a matter of balance and emphasis. That is the way it is with a healthy congregation, too: some things have already been done; others need yet to be done, each in its good time. Balance and emphasis are keys to healthy congregational life and mission.

At this final meeting, you might: (1) do Bible study related to making decisions about ministry and mission; (2) add suggestions about new activities to the list you are currently doing; (3) determine the emphasis that you think our congregation should have in ministry and mission during the coming months, and (4) formulate recommendations to the Administrative Council regarding the church's mission and ministry emphasis.

Bible Study

Read Luke 14:27-31

What does it mean to “sit down and count the cost”?

What does counting the cost have to do with preparing a mission design statement for your congregation?

Read II Corinthians 8:11-12 (TLB)

According to this passage, what does God expect of you?

What does this say about using your resources in mission?

Read Matthew 26:39

What does Jesus’ decision say to you regarding your decisions about congregational ministry and mission?

New Ministry and Mission Activities

List three activities that would add to what our congregation is now doing under each of the headings below. The activities may be some you know another congregation is doing elsewhere, some our congregation has done in the past, or some completely new ideas that you have.

1) Member Care

2) Worship

3) Education

4) Outreach

5) Evangelism

6) Property

7) Stewardship and Resources

8) Leadership

Session Six – Deciding What We Want to Do Now

Agenda

Bible study

Review of the previous meeting

Activity: perfecting the mission design statement in light of new additions and input

Pastor's sharing: Discussion of what we do now in light of the direction chosen and options for the future decided upon.

Discussion and Sharing

Closing worship time: Hymn, "The Church's One Foundation"

Evaluation of the Study Guide

Directions: In the time that you have taken to work through these study guides, certainly there have been moments when you wished it had addressed an issue differently. This is your opportunity to provide feedback to your leaders on your thoughts and feelings regarding this study guide process. Please give your responses to the following questions.

1. How helpful were the Bible Study questions to you?
2. Were the assignments helpful in enabling you to prepare for the upcoming session?
3. How were the sessions helpful to you? To your church?
4. Were there any sessions you wish you had not had to do?
5. What was the reason you become involved in this study guide?
6. What one thing would you say this study guide accomplished in your church?
7. What one thing did the study guide cause to be raised that you wish it had not?

8. How do you feel about the study guide as a whole?

9. What would you tell someone about this study guide who was looking to use it in their church?

10. What else would you like to share?

Appendix B

Parish Religious Information Form

1. Name:
2. Gender:
3. Date of Birth
4. Home Phone
5. Cell Phone
6. Email Address
7. Address
8. Marital Status (Married, Divorced, Widow/Widower, Single)
9. Marriage Date
10. Father's religion
11. Mother's religion
12. Group Participation
13. Membership Status (Member Yes / No)
14. Affiliate Member (Yes / No)
15. Church Name and Address
16. Change in religious affiliation to
17. Date Changed
18. Baptism (Yes / No) Church of Baptism
19. Education
20. Occupation
21. Place of Employment

22. Do you have a handicap
23. Special Need
24. Spiritual concerns or problems
25. Recommended pastoral care
26. Significant hurts, blows, or loss experiences (when?)
27. Major illness, operations, or hospitalization (When?)
28. Church Involvement (Presently, Childhood, Adolescence, and Adulthood)
29. Remembered Activities (+ or -)
30. What areas of ministry are you interested in?
31. What areas of ministry were you involved in?
32. Use of religious resource (Prayer, Bible, Communion, Giving, Tither, other)
33. Favorite literature, type, title
34. Favorite religious literature
35. Favorite Bible story and passage
36. Favorite hymn
37. Question from a parishioner
38. Additional information and observations, dates of pastoral visits

Bibliography

- Barclay, William. *The New Daily Study Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2011. CD edition.
- Barr, Browne. *High-Flying Geese: Unexpected Reflections on the Church and Its Ministry*. Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1983.
- Benton, John. *The big picture for small churches—and large ones, too!* New York: Evangelical Press, 2005.
- The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016,
- Carroll, Jackson W., editor. *Small Churches Are Beautiful*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Circuit Rider*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House. May 1986.
- Crandall, Ron. *Turnaround and Beyond: A Hopeful Future for the Small Membership Church*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2008.
- Dale, Robert. *To Dream Again*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981.
- Dudley, Carl S. *Effective Small Churches in the Twenty-first Century*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- _____. *Making the Small Church Effective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978.
- Duecker, R. Sheldon. *Tension in the Connection*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983.
- Maxie D. Dunnam, Gary J. Herbertson, and Everett L. Shostrom, *The Manipulator and the Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968.
- Gustafson, James M. *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Hamilton, Neill Q. *Recovery of the Protestant Adventure*. New York: Seabury Press, 1981,
- Hynson, Leon O. *To Reform the Nation*. Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1984.
- Journal of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1984,
https://archive.org/stream/journalbaltimore01unit/journalbaltimore01unit_djvu.txt
- Langford, Thomas A. *Practical Divinity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983.

- Madsen, Paul O. *The Small Church: Valid, Vital, Victorious*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1975.
- McElvaney, William K. *The People of God in Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.
- McIntosh, Gary L. *One Size Doesn't Fit All: Bringing Out the Best in Any Size Church*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1999.
- Mueller, Charles S. *God's People At Work in the Parish*. St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1979.
- Office of Researching and Planning. "Study on Parish Ministry." Newark: Archdiocese of Newark, 2018.
- Pneuman, Roy W. and Bruehl, Margaret E. *Managing Conflict*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982.
- Reed, Bruce. *The Task of the Church and the Role of Its Members*. New York: The Alban Institute, 1976.
- Schaller, Lyle E. *The Small church is beautiful*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982.
- _____. "Looking at the Small Church: A frame of Reference", *Christian Ministry*, July 1977,
- _____. *Looking In The Mirror*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984.
- _____. *Impact of the Future*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969. _
- Siefken, John. "What Is Church Vitalization?" The Eastern Pennsylvania Conference Team for Local Church Vitalization, September 2012.
- Tyson, John H. *Administration in the Small Membership Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- Watson, Kevin M. *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2014.
- Wagner, C. Peter. *Your Church Can be Healthy*. Creative Leadership Series, Lyle Schaller, ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979.
- Wallace, Julia Kuhn., Hynson, Dianna L., and General Board of Discipleship. *Small Membership Church: Serving with Significance in Your Context*. Nashville: Cokesbury, 2012.

Walrath, Douglas Alan. *Leading Churches Through Change*. Creative Leadership Series, Lyle Schaller, ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979.

Wilke, Richard B. *And Are We Yet Alive?*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986.

Willimon, William H., and Wilson, Robert L. *Preaching and Worship in the Small Church*. Creative Leadership Series, Lyle Schaller, ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980.

Wilson, Robert L. *Shaping the Congregation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981.

Biography

Hun Ju Lee is a Korean American. He was born in South Korea on March 12, 1975. He earned a Bachelor of Theology from Mokwon University in 1999 in South Korea, a Master of Divinity from Drew University Divinity School in 2005, and a Master of Theology from Princeton Theological Seminary in 2006. He was an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church and is a member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference.