

Nazarene Theological Seminary

DEEP WORK

How District Communities Can Work Together to Renew Their Witness and Mission

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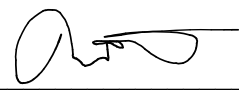
We, the undersigned, determined that this dissertation has met the academic requirements and standards of Nazarene Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry program.



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Epigraph

“More than anything, this moment requires those of us in positions of authority (and even most of us who are not) to embrace an adventure-or-die mindset, and find the courage and develop the capacity for a new day. We are heading into uncharted territory and are given the charge to lead a mission where the future is nothing like the past.”¹

~ Tod Bolsinger ~

“For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

~ Romans 12:4-5 ~

¹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. (Lisle, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 23.

Abstract

Middle judicatories within denominations were originally organized to catalyze and support the mission of the local church. As movements mature and institutionalize, however, the overseers of these regional bodies inevitably become more preoccupied with administrative matters and organizational preservation than with ensuring mission fidelity and fruitfulness. Yet bishops and superintendents are more than mid-level managers; they are key spiritual leaders who help the church become her best self and flourish in mission. In an increasingly secular age in which the character, credibility, and relevance of the church are in doubt, how can regional overseers lead in a way that engenders healthy and substantive reform in the church, such that our witness is revitalized, and our mission is renewed? How ought we to change our thinking, habits, relationships, and systems toward this end? This dissertation is an attempt to offer a framework for ecclesial overseers and their communities to engage in the difficult work of collective renewal. Given the complex nature of such an endeavor, inspiration for this framework has been drawn from a variety of sources, including: (1) the slow, patient work of discipleship embodied by the early church and monastic communities, (2) the mindsets and practices that have fueled some of the most innovative work being done by modern organizations, and (3) the Wesleyan practice of Christian Conferencing, reimagined for our current context.

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Chapter 1: The Church is in Trouble, and We Aren't Sure How to Fix It

A Church in Crisis

All living organisms are vulnerable to disease and decay, just as all organizations can experience disruption and stagnation. The church is no exception. Both in terms of participation and influence, the church in America is rapidly approaching crisis. In 1937, 73% of Americans reported belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque. After remaining relatively stable for over sixty years, that number fell dramatically between 2000-2020 to 47%, a drop of 23 percentage points in a single generation.² The percentage of American adults claiming no religious affiliation has skyrocketed; the “nones” now make up over 28% of the population (up from 16% in 2007), making them the largest cohort in the U.S. for the first time, more prevalent than Catholics (23%) or evangelical Protestants (24%).³ Though religious participation has rebounded somewhat in the aftermath of the COVID-19 health crisis, median worship attendance among U.S. congregations has been cut in half, to just 60 people, within the same time frame.⁴ In the first few months of the pandemic, over a third of practicing U.S. Christians stopped attending church, many of whom have yet to return.⁵ Only a third of congregations report they are growing (the majority of which is transfer, rather than conversion growth), while 54% are declining.⁶ In

² Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time,” Gallup.com (Gallup, November 20, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

³ Smith, Gregory A. “Religious ‘nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, January 24, 2024. Last modified January 24, 2024. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe>.

⁴ “Study: Attendance Hemorrhaging at Small and Midsize Us Congregations,” Religion News Service, October 15, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/10/14/study-attendance-at-small-and-midsize-us-congregations-is-hemorrhaging>.

⁵ “One in Three Practicing Christians Has Stopped Attending Church during COVID-19.” Barna Group. Accessed December 2, 2021. <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2>.

⁶ “Back to Normal? The Mixed Messages of Congregational Recovery Coming Out of the Pandemic.” Hartford Institute for Religion Research, August 2023. <https://www.covidreligionresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Epic-4-2.pdf>

2019, 4500 churches in the U.S. closed, significantly outpacing the 3000 churches that were started that same year.⁷

Churches are not only becoming fewer and smaller; those that remain are also getting older – much older. On average, 36% of U.S. churchgoers - are 65 or older, twice that age group's representation in the general population.⁸ Only 49% of Millennials identify as Christian, compared to 84% of the silent generation.⁹ Gen Z and Millennial adults are far less likely than previous generations to say that religion is important in their life, attend religious services, or believe it is necessary to raise children in a religion.¹⁰ Nationally, the average age of senior pastors in 2024 is now over 60 years old, setting up a monumental pastoral succession crisis in the coming years.¹¹

These trends are reflected in the USA/Canada Region of the Church of the Nazarene, the denomination in which the researcher has served for more than twenty years as a local pastor and district superintendent. According to an analysis of statistical data between 2008-2023, Nazarene churches in the region are in precipitous and continuous decline.¹² Total average morning worship attendance has fallen by 36%, from 519,000 to 330,00. At the current rate, in six years (2030), the average in-person attendance will be half of what it was in 2008. Median

⁷ Scott Neuman, "The Faithful See Both Crisis and Opportunity as Churches Close across the Country." NPR, May 17, 2023. Last modified May 17, 2023. Accessed December 18, 2024.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/17/1175452002/church-closings-religious-affiliation>

⁸ "Faith Communities Today 2020 Summary Report." Accessed December 18, 2024.

<https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>.

⁹ Travis Mitchell, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, October 17, 2019. Last modified October 17, 2019. Accessed December 18, 2024.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace>.

¹⁰ Cox, Daniel A. "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America - the Survey Center on American Life." The Survey Center on American Life. Last modified March 31, 2023. Accessed December 18, 2024.

<https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>.

¹¹ Faith Communities Today Report, Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview, 2021, Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford CT.

¹² Ron Benefiel, "Statistical Trends in USA and Canada for the Church of the Nazarene: 2008-2023", Point Loma Nazarene University Center for Pastoral Leadership, *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 24:1 (Spring 2024)

congregational attendance has fallen by 37%, from 60 people to just 38 people. In the Southwest Field, where the researcher's district is located, median attendance has fallen by almost 50% in just 15 years. There are half as many Nazarene pastors under the age of 40 today (10.1%) as there were in 2000 (20.3%). Two-thirds of our pastors are now over the age of 50. By 2033, half the pastoral cohort could be over 60. Financially, congregations today have just 65% of the income they had in 2008, when adjusting for inflation. In 2023, the median tithes and offerings per congregation was just \$70,390.¹³ In the last twenty years, all seven fields in the USA/Canada Region have experienced drastic decline in worship attendance, ranging between 29% to 47%. During that period, only three of the 78 districts in the USA/Canada Region saw an increase in worship attendance.¹⁴ It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Church of the Nazarene in the USA is in free fall and could very well collapse within our lifetimes.

These patterns are deeply troubling and are likely to continue in an increasingly skeptical and secular age. Those tasked with overseeing the work of the church are under significant pressure to reverse such trends and facilitate renewal. The reasons behind the church's decline, however, are numerous and complex. Many of the challenges we face are of an adaptive nature, requiring deep reflection and a willingness to innovate. Growing antipathy toward evangelical Christians, particularly among the religiously unaffiliated and young adults, is most certainly a key contributor to decline. A steady stream of high-profile scandals resulting from sexual misconduct, financial impropriety, toxic leadership, and spiritual abuse has eroded public trust in clergy and the institutional church.¹⁵ A poll conducted by Pew Research in 2017 revealed that atheists and agnostics had warmer feelings toward every other religious group – including Jews,

¹³ "Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2013-2023: Annual Statistics from the General Secretary's Reports." <https://resources.nazarene.org/index.php/s/P4PWDYpB9p2aygJ>

¹⁴ Customized Nazarene Research Services Report, Requested Sept 2024

Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims – than they did toward evangelical Christians.¹⁶ In an annual Gallup poll rating Americans’ opinions regarding the honesty and ethical standards of people in various professions, just 32% felt clergy were trustworthy, an all-time low.¹⁷

There is a large perceived gap between the beliefs and values of White conservative evangelicals (who are disproportionately represented in the US Church of the Nazarene relative to the general population) and those held by people outside their subculture.¹⁸ For example, White evangelical Protestants were among the least likely to support measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, such as obeying shut-down orders, wearing face coverings, or getting vaccinated.¹⁹ More than a quarter of White evangelicals subscribe to various QAnon conspiracy theories; more than half express support for the debunked claim that Antifa was responsible for the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.²⁰ White evangelicals are by far the least likely to believe that climate change is real or that it is a result of human activity.²¹

Across a wide range of issues, there is also a growing disparity between what young people care about and what they believe their faith communities care about, including

¹⁶ “How Americans Feel About Different Religious Groups.” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, May 30, 2020. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/02/15/americans-express-increasingly-warm-feelings-toward-religious-groups>.

¹⁷ Megan Brennan and Jeffrey M. Jones. “Ethics Ratings of Nearly All Professions down in U.S.” Gallup.Com. Gallup, October 16, 2024. Last modified October 16, 2024. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/608903/ethics-ratings-nearly-professions-down.aspx>.

¹⁸ Michael Lipka, “The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups.” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 30, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups>. See also Michael Lipka, “U.S. Religious Groups and Their Political Leanings,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, August 28, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings>. Statistically speaking, the Church of the Nazarene is overwhelmingly White (88% vs. 66% of all US adults) and Republican (63% vs. 37% of all US adults), making it one of the least diverse religious groups in the United States.

¹⁹ Liz Hamel, “KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: June 2021,” KFF, June 30, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/kff-covid-19-vaccine-monitor-june-2021>.

²⁰ “Survey: More than a Quarter of White Evangelicals Believe Core Qanon Conspiracy Theory.” Religion News Service, February 12, 2021. <https://religionnews.com/2021/02/11/survey-more-than-a-quarter-of-white-evangelicals-believe-core-qanon-conspiracy-theory>.

²¹ “How Religion Impacts Americans’ Views on Climate Change and Energy Issues.” Pew Research Center Science & Society. Pew Research Center, August 20, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/science/2015/10/22/religion-and-views-on-climate-and-energy-issues>.

LGBTQA+ rights, gender equity, racial justice, immigration reform, income inequality, environmental causes, and reproductive rights.²² A 2007 Barna Study revealed that 85% of young outsiders perceive Christians as hypocritical and 87% perceive them as judgmental, with the most common perception being that Christians are anti-homosexual. Ninety-one percent of young non-Christians and eighty percent of young churchgoers said this phrase described Christianity. Probing deeper, respondents explained that “beyond their recognition that Christians oppose homosexuality, they believe that Christians show excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians.”²³ These generational differences may explain why only 33 percent of young adults feel that church offers a place where they belong.²⁴

Confronting Christians’ poor reputation with outsiders, however, is only one among many problems with which the church must contend. Congregations continue to get older and smaller at the same time they are experiencing a shortage of clergy, falling revenues, aging buildings, and rising costs. New technology is reshaping how we think, interact, work, and play. It may also reshape what it means to be human. Major crises such as wars, pandemics, and recessions regularly upend life in a hyper-connected world. The church finds itself entangled in one cultural dispute after another and seems unwilling or unable to confront its growing embrace of Christian nationalism. Census projections indicate that the U.S. will become “minority White” by 2045, with Whites comprising 49.7% of the population in contrast to 24.6% for Hispanics, 13.1% for

²² “The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty.” Accessed December 2, 2021. <https://springtideresearch.org/the-state-of-religion-2021-digital-edition/?page=34>.

²³ “A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity.” Barna Group. Last modified December 18, 2023. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.barna.com/research/a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity>.

²⁴ Barna Group, *Reviving Evangelism: Current Realities That Demand a New Vision for Sharing Faith*, (Dallas, TX: Barna Group, 2019). 8.

Blacks, 7.9% for Asians, and 3.8% for multiracial populations.²⁵ Congregations that have difficulty adapting to these shifting demographics will likely find it harder and harder to attract new members or make a meaningful impact in their community.

There are many other factors contributing to the decline of Western Christianity that are difficult for church leaders to grasp, let alone address. Falling church revenues come at a time when ministry operating costs such as salaries, building maintenance, and program expenses continue to increase. Of the five most expensive cities to live in the United States, two are in the Northern California District.²⁶ Generational shifts in giving patterns are impacting revenues across all Christian institutions, from churches to seminaries to missions agencies. Quoting a philanthropic research study, Mark DeYmaz notes that “the Silent Generation (born between 1928-1945) is more likely to assist religious organizations than any of the subsequent generations... Where 45 percent of Boomers (born between 1946-1964) say their financial contribution is key, only 36 percent of Gen Xers (born between 1965–1980) and 25 percent of Millennials (born between 1981-1996) think that what matters most is a difference made by money. Instead, they believe that volunteering and spreading the word is more impactful.”²⁷

Another complicating factor is the apparent correlation between increasing wealth and waning religious participation in prosperous societies. Although the United States remains somewhat of an outlier. “As lives gradually become more comfortable and secure, people in

²⁵ Frey, William H. “The US Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects.” Brookings. Last modified March 9, 2022. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects>.

²⁶ Burrows, Dan, and Donna LeValley. “The 10 Most Expensive Cities to Live in the U.S.” Kiplinger.Com. Kiplinger, December 21, 2022. Last modified December 21, 2022. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.kiplinger.com/real-estate/605051/most-expensive-cities-in-the-us>.

²⁷ Mark DeYmaz, *The Coming Revolution in Church Economics: Why Tithes and Offerings Are No Longer Enough, and What You Can Do about It*. (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2019), 34.

more affluent societies usually grow increasingly indifferent to religious values, more skeptical of supernatural beliefs and less willing to become actively engaged in religious institutions.”²⁸

Demographic shifts also present an adaptive challenge for the church. Between 2000 and 2020, the White population changed from 50% to 36% of all residents in the Nine-County Bay Area, in which the majority of Northern California District Nazarene churches are located.²⁹ Currently, less than one in seven White Bay Area residents is under 18 years old, compared to over one-quarter of Latinx residents.³⁰ As of 2020, Asian Americans now form the largest community of color in the Bay Area (28%), followed by Latinos (24%).

The full range of factors contributing to the decline of the church in the West is well beyond the scope of this study; suffice it to say, the decline is real and sustained, the reasons are numerous and complex, and the church needs to adapt.

Denominational Leaders Are Struggling to Respond

In the face of such complexity and challenge, what are denominational leaders to do? As one pastor reminded the researcher recently, “The crisis facing the church is not necessarily our fault, but it is our problem.” The genesis of this dissertation has been the researcher’s own sense of inadequacy and frustration as a district superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene as his community struggles with ongoing decline and an uncertain future. The Northern California (NorCal) District, in which the researcher has served in the superintendency since 2017, consists of approximately ninety congregations that minister in at least seventeen different languages:

²⁸ “Do Countries Lose Religion as They Gain Wealth?” CBC News. CBC/Radio Canada, April 10, 2019. Last modified April 10, 2019. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/do-countries-lose-religion-as-they-gain-wealth-1.1310451>.

²⁹ “Race/Ethnicity: Bay Area Equity Atlas.” Bay Area Equity Atlas. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://bayareaequityatlas.org/indicators/race-ethnicity>.

³⁰ “How Has the Bay Area’s Population Changed since 2010?” Bay Area Equity Atlas. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://bayareaequityatlas.org/population-change>.

English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, Samoan, Fijian, Cambodian, Indonesian, Laotian, Tagalog, Hindi, Punjabi, Malayalam, Tamil, Telegu, and Haitian Creole. In the year that the researcher started his tenure, the district's aggregate statistics in virtually every key measure of congregational health, including worship attendance, conversions, baptisms, membership, and Sunday School participation were at historic lows. The average size of the NorCal District's congregations, in terms of weekly attendance, was forty-five people. In comparison, attendance in churches on neighboring districts was significantly higher, with those belonging to the Sacramento District averaging 179 people, those in the Los Angeles District averaging 133 people, and churches in the Central California District averaging 91 people. Since that time, average in-person worship attendance in the NorCal District has fallen by another 20%, to just thirty-six people. No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in accelerating the decline of the church. Although the district has invested in several new congregations since the researcher became superintendent (fifteen and counting), the number of churches being closed is outpacing those being started. By the time this dissertation is complete, the NorCal District will have closed six more churches, for a total of twenty-two closures in the past seven years. Almost thirty percent of the district's English-speaking churches have been declared inactive since 2017, including several legacy congregations whose membership once numbered in the hundreds.

Ron Benefiel, former president of Nazarene Theological seminary, warns that while there are flourishing churches, "these are mostly anomalous and don't reflect the state of the Church as a whole. Like most other denominations in the US and Canada, the Church of the Nazarene is experiencing major decline. [Faced with dwindling attendance and resources], many churches may be looking at a future of mostly-empty sanctuaries, skeletal pastoral staff, and older

facilities with significant deferred maintenance.”³¹ For the Northern California District, that future is already here.

While front-line pastors are directly responsible for nurturing the faith and mission of local congregations, mid-level ecclesiastical leaders are uniquely positioned to facilitate the broader work of renewal within the church. Bishops and superintendents are more than administrators; they serve in the tradition of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers of the church, appointed by Christ to help the entire body reach unity and maturity in the faith.³² Unfortunately, many overseers function as mid-level managers rather than as spiritual leaders and reformers. There are many valid reasons for this. Most superintendents are constrained by limited staffing and finances, oversee many pastors and churches spread over a large geographical area, and are regularly inundated with administrative duties, crises, and complex decisions. They are rarely able to develop close personal relationships with pastors and parishioners due to the demands of the job; not only does this make their work a lonely assignment, but it also makes it hard to build the relational capital necessary to lead change. Many of the problems facing the church require deep reflection, extensive collaboration, and adaptive thinking, all of which require margin that denominational overseers do not have. In the researcher’s case, for example, it would take almost two years to visit all ninety churches in the district for Sunday worship, assuming he was able to divide his weekends among them equally. In addition to caring for the needs of their own constituents, ecclesial overseers also are expected to support the broader work of their denominations by serving on regional committees, sitting on college boards, engaging in speaking and writing opportunities, and attending conferences. Many bishops and superintendents keep a grueling schedule involving frequent travel and irregular

³¹ Benefiel, “Statistical Trends”.

³² Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV.

work hours. It is common, therefore, for such leaders to suffer from isolation, exhaustion, and discouragement. Most days, it is all they can do to keep their heads above water, let alone make any headway in solving any of the numerous adaptive challenges facing the church. They do what they can to help their congregations flourish, but the more substantive work of collective renewal often feels like an impossible task.

New Capacities for a New Day

Tod Bolsinger, executive director of the DePree Center Church Leadership Institute and senior congregational strategist at Fuller Seminary, associate professor of leadership formation at Fuller Seminary, summarizes the challenge and opportunity before the church:

Today's leaders are facing complex challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. These challenges are more systemic in nature and require broad, widespread learning. They can't be solved through a conference, a video series or a program. Even more complicated, these problems are very often the result of yesterday's solutions. They are what Ronald Heifetz calls "adaptive challenges." Adaptive challenges are the true tests of leadership. They are challenges that go beyond the technical solutions of resident experts or best practices, or even the organization's current knowledge. They arise when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the successes of the past. They are challenges that cannot be solved through compromise or win-win scenarios, or by adding another ministry or staff person to the team. They demand that leaders make hard choices about what to preserve and to let go. They are challenges that require people to learn and to change, that require leaders to experience and navigate profound loss.³³

To put it bluntly, most pastors were trained for a world that no longer exists, when the primary leadership toolbox consisted of "teaching (for providing Christian education) liturgics (for leading Christian services) pastoral care (for offering Christian counsel and support)" (sic).³⁴ Similarly, the majority of denominational systems and governing structures were conceived during a time when Christianity still stood at the privileged center of Western cultural life, a

³³ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*. (Lisle, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 19.

³⁴ Bolsinger, 13.

period which is increasingly in the rear-view mirror. It is not only front-line pastors that need to think differently and acquire new tools; leaders at every level in the church – local, regional, and global – must have what Bolsinger calls an “adventure-or-die mindset, and find the courage and develop the capacity for a new day.”

It is indeed a new day for the church, and new paradigms and capacities will be needed if we are to thrive. To paraphrase Marshall Goldsmith, “What got us here won’t get us there.”³⁵ Superficial solutions will not suffice; navigating this cultural moment will require a substantive and sustained commitment to change. Anything less would be akin to “rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic,” a cliché which, ironically, first appeared in a Time Magazine article in 1969 about the decline of religion.³⁶

The late Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer believed that “about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” Phyllis Tickle, founding editor of the religion department of Publishers Weekly, observed that whenever this “five-hundred-year rummage sale” takes place, three things tend to happen:

1. A new form of Christianity emerges that is alive and fruitful,
2. The previously dominant form of Christianity is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified version of itself, and

³⁵ Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful*. (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2007), 10.

³⁶ “Are You Rearranging Deck Chairs on Your Very Own Titanic?” *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, n.d. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychoanalysis-unplugged/202110/are-you-rearranging-deck-chairs-on-your-very-own-titanic>. The Time Magazine article cited an unnamed priest who compared the Catholic Church’s ineffectual attempts to attract parishioners to “shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic.” Since then, the analogy has been used to refer to any futile activity undertaken in the face of impending doom.

3. A fresh outpouring of evangelistic power takes place in both the emerging form of church and the cleansed, established form.³⁷

The church is in dire need of reform, and that perpetually, a belief that Karl Barth captured in the phrase, “Ecclesia Semper Reformanda.” By reform, the researcher does not have in mind the idea of protest or revolution, but rather the process of *theosis* - the work of grace by which we are brought into union with God and transformation into His likeness – as it is experienced within the larger community of faith.³⁸ The church must submit to the re-formative work of the Holy Spirit – morally, culturally, theologically, and/or organizationally - so that she may be what God intended her to be and do what God intended her to do.

Revitalizing Our Witness, Renewing Our Mission

The researcher’s thesis is that change is possible if district communities will engage in the difficult work of renewal. Middle judicatories are more than a bureaucratic necessity; properly understood, they are covenant communities with shared identity, values, and mission, in which every member contributes to the renewal of God’s church and the advancement of God’s kingdom. Districts play a critical role in the collective life, mission, and future of the Church of the Nazarene. While the denomination affirms the vital role of local congregations as the most essential missional unit of the church, the establishment of districts has supported its collective work and witness in ways that catalyze and magnify its impact. Despite the challenges named earlier, district superintendents are nevertheless well (perhaps even best) positioned to facilitate

³⁷ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 16.

³⁸ “Theosis (Eastern Christian Theology)”. Wikipedia. Retrieved April 4, 2022, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_\(Eastern_Christian_theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_(Eastern_Christian_theology)). Theosis (Greek: *θέωσις*), or deification (deification may also refer to apotheosis, lit. "making divine"), is a transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with God, as taught by the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Byzantine Catholic Churches.

meaningful reform within their communities. Though districts may include dozens of congregations over a large geographical area, most are of a manageable enough size that the superintendent can remain relationally connected to his or her constituents, create structures of support, and shape organizational culture. The community is close enough in proximity that its members can periodically gather for learning and collaboration. These connections enable a district community to share knowledge, people, and resources with one another. Though the work of renewal is difficult, it is not impossible, if the community commits to doing it together.

The nature and work of the superintendency is admittedly complex and multifaceted. While there are many responsibilities and opportunities worthy of the superintendent's attention, two themes emerge as especially important to the task of leading reform in an increasingly skeptical and secular age. First, he or she needs to guide the community toward revitalizing – and humbly repairing, if necessary – its witness among its neighbors. Second, the superintendent must help the community renew and radically reimagine, if necessary, its mission in the world. Therefore, districts must give thoughtful, sustained attention to both *spiritual formation* and *missional innovation*. The first theme invites us to reflect on what it means to be faithful, while the second challenges us to consider what it means to be fruitful.

This dissertation is not about how to “fix” a district or reverse the decline that the church is experiencing. Such an endeavor would be far beyond the reach of any individual. Rather, the researcher hopes to make a modest contribution to the body of literature regarding the challenging task of facilitating renewal within the life of middle judicatories. How ought we to think about districts? What is the role of the district superintendent (DS) in the community? Who shall we be and how shall we live together? Why and when ought we to gather as a community? What kind of work might we engage in that will help us experience deep and sustained renewal?

Method: Sources, Chapter Theses, Parameters, Definitions

The existing literature pertaining to how mid-level judicatory leaders can facilitate such renewal in a rapidly changing world is sparse. Therefore, the researcher has drawn inspiration and material from various fields in the development of this dissertation, including monasticism (both old and new), organizational theory, change management, and design thinking. Adaptive challenges are those for which no pre-existing technical solutions exist; they exist outside the bounds of the community's current knowledge. Solving them requires working in ways that are creative, cross-disciplinary, and often counter-intuitive. A community faced with adaptive challenges will need to draw fresh inspiration from contexts, cultures, fields, and industries different from their own. Such exploration often leads to breakthroughs in thinking and practice. The researcher sought to apply such an approach in this work.

The ensuing chapters will be organized as follows:

Literature Review

1. On the Work of the Superintendency
2. On the Work of Spiritual Formation
3. On the Work of Missional Innovation

Proposal

1. How Ought We to Think About Districts?
2. Values and Practices of Communities Seeking Renewal
3. Rethinking the Superintendency
4. Five Kinds of Deep Work that District Community Can Pursue Together

Application

5. Preview of Dissertation Artifact – A Rhythm of Purposeful Gathering for District Communities: How and when will we come together to engage in the work of renewal? What will we do during those times? What is our objective?

Through the course of this dissertation, the researcher will propose ideas such as:

- Within the district community, the district superintendent fulfills four key functions as “the keeper of the story,” a prophet to the church, an incarnational signpost, and a convener of the called.
- Districts ought to learn from the spiritual practices and missional culture of an emerging generation of “New Monastics” who, inspired by the great religious orders of our past, seek to preserve and propagate the faith in our era of cultural upheaval.
- The wider district community must give sustained attention to both spiritual formation and missional innovation. Toward this end, the community should ask questions like, “What is the *habitus* that shapes our community? How might we creatively pursue the “greater works” that God has given us to do?”³⁹ What shared rhythms and practices might we adopt in each of these areas that help the community participate in our own renewal?”
- To remain resilient and relevant in a changing culture, districts ought to cultivate a “blended ecology,” in which inherited forms of church exist in symbiotic relationship with fresh expressions.⁴⁰
- Communities that are attempting the difficult task of revitalizing the church in diverse, complex, post-Christian contexts share many common characteristics. Districts would do well to study and adopt these same values and practices.

³⁹ John 14:12.

⁴⁰ Michael Adam Beck, *Deep Roots, Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology*. (Franklin, TN: Asbury Seedbed Publishing, 2019), 19. Beck defines a fresh expression is “a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church.”

In summary, this dissertation is about why districts need to give attention to both revitalizing their witness and renewing their mission, and how they might pursue this important work together. District communities that eagerly participate in God's continual re-formation of the church will find that the field is indeed ripe for harvest, if we are willing to adapt our thinking and retool our churches for mission in a changing culture. Like the tree of life in the Revelator's vision of the new creation, we can learn to yield spiritual fruit in every season and contribute to the healing of our world.⁴¹

⁴¹ Revelation 22:2.

Chapter 2: Reviewing the Literature

The work of the superintendency requires a broad set of skills and knowledge, some of which are readily identifiable, while others may be more counterintuitive or cross-disciplinary in nature. It is understood that ecclesial overseers should have a base level of competency in financial and administrative matters, for example. However, in the course of his duties, the researcher has found it helpful to glean insights from seemingly unrelated fields such as neuroscience, large-scale construction, sustainable farming, and microbusiness development. Adaptive breakthroughs often result from combining two or more elements in new ways, a practice sometimes referred to as “mashup innovation.”⁴² In that spirit, it has seemed appropriate and helpful to study a few different topics that, when synthesized and applied to the life of middle judicatories, may lead to new ways of thinking, living, and working together for the sake of renewal. The work presented here may be described as more broad than deep, but taken together, it is the researcher’s hope that fellow colleagues will find the resulting proposals helpful to their own work as ecclesial overseers.

The following literature review is organized into four general themes: (1) the work of the superintendency, (2) the work of spiritual formation in monastic communities and the early church, (3) the work and witness of modern monastic movements, and (4) the work of missional innovation, with some insights drawn from the field of design thinking.

On the Work of the Superintendency

⁴² “Mashup Innovation: Fast Idea Generation with Hyper Island.” Bart Vermijlen. Last modified September 13, 2016. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.bartvermijlen.com/fast-idea-generation-hyper-island-mashup-innovation>.

Although much has been written regarding the art of leadership, spiritual formation, and missional innovation in the local church, there is a dearth of resources that specifically address the role that ecclesiastical overseers play in advancing God's mission and facilitating reform within their communities. One of the few books on the subject is Paul Borden's *Hit the Bullseye: How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field*. Borden suggests that turnaround requires a shift from passivity and complacency to an "expectation of victory" and the implementation of "individual, accountable leadership." While he is not wrong, most of his recommendations are common-sense organizational management techniques couched in Christian language: set goals, establish benchmarks for success, promote leaders who get results, provide training and resources, form coaching clusters, and so on. There is very little literature written about mid-level ecclesial leadership from a distinctly Wesleyan perspective. Russell E. Richey's *Episcopacy in the Methodist Tradition: Perspectives and Proposals* and William Willimon's *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question* are among the few full-length treatments of the subject. Unfortunately, the researcher did not come across any such major works produced within the Nazarene community. The resources provided to Nazarene superintendents is largely limited to internal training documents that describe how to handle the administrative tasks of the role: interpreting and applying denominational polity, conducting pastoral searches and church reviews, running district assemblies, handling legal issues, managing crises, and meeting reporting requirements.

The work of the superintendency is a complex role for which there is no precise analogue. Though there is a pastoral dimension to their work, superintendents are not front-line workers when it comes to the mission of the church. Rather, they are responsible for providing support from behind. Nevertheless, the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene affirms the vital

importance of this role, stating that “We are agreed on the necessity of a superintendency that shall complement and assist the local church in the fulfilling of its mission and objectives. The superintendency shall (1) Build morale, (2) Provide motivation, (3) Supply management and method assistance, and (4) Organize and encourage organization of new churches and missions everywhere.”⁴³

Beyond this brief description, superintendents also devote their energies toward generative work that includes, but is not limited to:

- Providing Theological Vision and Missional Clarity
- Promoting Deep Spiritual Formation Among Clergy and Congregations
- Rallying People and Resources Toward Missional Effectiveness
- Protecting the Church’s Witness Via Systems of Accountability and Oversight
- Recruiting, Training, and Deploying Pastors

In an era of rapid cultural change and precipitous decline for the church, however, district superintendents need to go a step further. Districts must be more than a loose federation of independent congregations, organized for the sake of administrative efficiency. It is incumbent on the superintendent to help their people become a covenant community that shares a common life, identity, and purpose. “[Adaptive] leadership is always about personal and corporate transformation,” observes Tod Bolsinger. “But because we are hard-wired to resist change, every living system requires someone in it to live into and lead the transformation necessary to take us into the future we are resisting. The person who takes personal responsibility to live into the new

⁴³ *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2023-2027 Edition*. (Kansas City, MO: International Church of the Nazarene, 2024), 39.

future in a transformative way, in relationship to the others in the system, is the leader. If someone is not functioning as a leader, the system will always default to the status quo.”⁴⁴

Of course, if leading adaptively were easy, everyone would be doing it. Denominational conferences and districts are complex entities that are hard to manage, let alone change. In *Seven Levers: Missional Strategies for Conferences*, United Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase observes, “We badly underestimate the size and complexity of annual conferences and how difficult they are to lead, manage, direct, and coordinate.”⁴⁵ Unlike many organizations, mid-level judicatories are not “perfectly efficient cascading mechanisms by which to embed culture, strategy, value, vision, or practice... Pressures on the organization militate against streamlining, unifying, and cooperating on a common vision, mission, and set of values... [As a result], conferences are a largely underutilized resource because they are poorly focused, are diffuse in purpose, and operate with inadequate systems of accountability and poor alignment of time, personnel, and resources.”⁴⁶ Schnase points out that even with the sophisticated infrastructure and combined efforts of all fifty-seven US conferences employing forty-seven bishops, more than four hundred superintendents, and thousands of conference staff, the United Methodist Church has continued to decline precipitously in the United States. “Despite all the resources we employ and the six billion dollars in new money each year for the purpose of making disciples, the United Methodist Church hasn’t been able to reach one more person than it started with each year, and that’s been true for every year since 1966.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Bolsinger, 21.

⁴⁵ Robert Schnase, *Seven Levers: Missional Strategies for Conferences*. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2014), 5.

⁴⁶ Schnase, 6.

⁴⁷ Schnase, 7.

In 2009, the UMC Council of Bishops commissioned the most extensive organizational study ever undertaken on a mainline denomination. The resulting Towers-Watson Report, based on forty years of statistics for more than 33,000 UMC churches and hundreds of interviews with congregations, pastors, and laity confirmed patterns of dramatic decline and long-term financial sustainability.⁴⁸ Causes for decline included

rampant mistrust, dysfunctional decision-making processes, distance between the people in the pew and the leaders in authority, unsustainable financial models, a crisis of relevance, difficulty in recruiting clergy, the age gap between current congregations and the mission field, unclear means of viewing progress and unreliable measures of fruitfulness, too much complacency, and no clear vision, priorities or strategies.⁴⁹

Of the five recommendations offered by the report, the two most critical fall within the purview of mid-level judicatories: (1) increasing the number of vital congregations, and (2) reforming clergy systems of recruitment, candidacy, mentoring, education, skills training, supervision, evaluation, and deployment.”⁵⁰ As such, the possibility and responsibility for missional renewal can and must be taken up by superintendents and the wider district community.

Though district superintendents in the Church of the Nazarene have limited formal authority over local pastors and congregations, they do have certain tools at their disposal through which they exert influence. Schnase identifies at least five of them: ⁵¹

1. **The Authority to Convene:** Overseers have the ability to gather the community for dialogue, discernment, exploration, and learning. John Wesley believed in the value of Christian conferencing, a means of grace by which God shapes the people of God as they gather in purposeful community with one another. Methodist scholar Kevin Watson defines Christian conference as “honest, direct, piercing conversation with other

⁴⁸ Schnase, 8.

⁴⁹ Schnase, 9.

⁵⁰ Schnase, 9.

⁵¹ Schnase, 24-34.

Christians that was intended to help the participants grow in holiness.”⁵² We will revisit this practice later in this discussion.

2. **The Authority to Select Leadership:** Schnase notes that “the more complex and diffuse an organization, the more its individual components crave stability and cling to their habits. When we ask [a community], through its nominating process, to identify leadership for a committee meant to lead change, we almost guarantee that the resulting team will replicate the same limitations as the body that elects them.”⁵³ Superintendents should not hesitate to recruit leaders and form teams apart from these elected roles, consisting of people “who are invested in change, driven by a sense of urgency, and have the expertise needed” for the task at hand.⁵⁴
3. **The Authority to Set the Agenda:** Schnase agrees with Ron Heifetz that “attention is the currency of leadership. People expect leaders to select the issues that warrant attention.”⁵⁵ What will we talk about when we gather? What do we hope to achieve during our time together? Ecclesial overseers must prayerfully and strategically choose what they call the community to devote their time, energy, and resources to accomplishing.
4. **The Authority to Clarify Priorities.** Subsequent to the task of setting the agenda is that of clarifying priorities. Conversations need to be distilled into a clear call to action that moves the community toward renewal. Renowned management consultant Peter Drucker observed that “efficiency is concerned with doing things right. Effectiveness is doing the right things.”⁵⁶

⁵² “Means of Grace: Christian Conferencing.” Last modified April 30, 2014. Accessed December 18, 2024. ResourceUMC. <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/means-of-grace-christian-conferencing>.

⁵³ Schnase, 25.

⁵⁴ Schnase, 26.

⁵⁵ Schnase, 27.

⁵⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974), 45.

5. **The Power of a Common Language.** Schnase writes that “In a large complex organization with diffusely distributed authority, an underutilized tool available to leaders is the power of a common language. Words that give direction to behavior, value, and attitude do more to align, motivate, and unite than any restructuring chart or newly adopted policies.”⁵⁷

On the Work of Spiritual Formation: Lessons from Monasticism and the Early Church

The church has fallen on hard times before. The people of God have experienced many seasons of disruption, change, hardship, corruption, compromise, and persecution. And yet, in every generation and in every place, God raised up a remnant of genuine believers who display an authentic life of faith that is attractive to outsiders. Monastic communities often fulfill this role. Such movements have offered valuable tools for faith formation, such as the Rule of Benedict and the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius. Historically, religious orders have been responsible for many important cultural innovations that have benefited humanity. Historian Elizabeth Rapley notes that,

After the collapse of the Roman Empire and throughout the violent centuries that followed, it was monks who kept the memory of Christianity alive. When, inch by inch, western Europe emerged from its Dark Ages, much of its developing dynamism came from them. There was nothing they did not turn their hand to. The building and adornment of churches and cathedrals, the copying and illumination of the written word, the development of new techniques in agriculture and animal husbandry: all these achievements bore their imprint. Then, as society matured and settled down, their services expanded and became more complex. They preached, taught, nursed the sick, championed the poor. Above all they explored, and advanced, the faith. Later, as the world beyond Europe came into view, they went out to win it in the name of the Lord. Western civilization without them would have been a very different thing.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Schnase, 29.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Rapley, *The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of the Religious Orders and How They Shaped Our World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011, Kindle Edition), Loc. 22-27.

Stuart Murray Williams, an urban church planter in East London, posits that “about every 500 years the Church has relied on some form of monasticism to help it adapt from one cultural epoch to another.”⁵⁹ Williams and other believers in similar post-Christian contexts have been quietly pioneering fresh expressions of the church that reflect characteristics of earlier monastic communities. Like their forebears, these “new monastics” place a high value on discipleship, adopt a shared rule of life that shapes both private and communal spirituality, and emphasize “sent-ness” as indispensable to the fulfillment of the *mission Dei*.

The devotional and missional life of monastic communities is not only instructive for the local church, however, but also for denominational leaders and the regions they oversee. In many ways, superintendents function much like abbots charged with the direction and care of souls in monastery communities, though their members may be dispersed throughout a large geographical area. Jeren Rowell, president of Nazarene Theological Seminary, believes that “The role of the bishop is to try and call out a community that orders its life around the values and priorities, not of this world, but of the kingdom of God as expressed when God’s people live together in a covenant of self-sacrificing love.”⁶⁰ Assuming this to be true, how might the values and practices of monastic communities inform how districts imagine their own life together? Three elements of monastic communities bear relevance to our discussion regarding revitalizing the witness and renewing the mission of the church: (1) Cultivation of the Interior Life, (2) Commitment to the Community of Faith, and (3) Participation in Mission.

Cultivation of the Interior Life

⁵⁹ Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby, Aaron Kennedy, *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*. (London: Canterbury Press, 2010, Kindle Edition), Loc. 384.

⁶⁰ Diane Leclerc, Mark A. Maddix, *Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2014), 224.

The Greek word *monos*, from which monasticism derives its name, means “alone.”

Rapley explains, “At the very foundation of early Christian monasticism lay the imperative of aloneness, flight from the world, submersion in deep and holy silence. And the traditional setting for this was the desert.”⁶¹ When, in 313 AD, Constantine decreed an end to the persecution of his subjects on religious grounds, Christians suddenly found their faith tolerated, even privileged, after living under the threat of persecution for generations. “They no longer risked anything by believing. The fading of the threat left them in a spiritual void. Monasticism came to fill that void. The grace and high esteem once awarded to the martyr's death were transferred to the death of the flesh represented by virginity and the asceticism that accompanied it.”⁶²

Comfort, privilege, power, and wealth tend to have a sterilizing, if not corrupting, effect on the spiritual life. Jesus observed in the Parable of the Sower that there are some who hear the gospel, but like soil infested with weeds, their preoccupation with life's worries, riches, and pleasure prevents them from maturing and bearing fruit.⁶³ A key feature of monastic communities, both past and present, is the practice of retreating from the world in order to give attention to the interior life of faith. Practices like silence, solitude, prayer, and fasting help us to master our appetites and ambitions, so that our souls may be brought into greater alignment with the will of God.

Likewise, intentional cultivation of the interior life is a key feature of new monastic communities. Ian Mobsby observes that these communities generally adopt one of three historical approaches, adapted to the urban, post-Christian contexts which they inhabit:

⁶¹ Rapley, 62.

⁶² Rapley, 73-77.

⁶³ Luke 8:14 NIV.

- The first kind of community identifies with monks and nuns who have established new places for prayer and contemplation, inviting others to retreat from the world in order to pursue the divine. Seeking the sacred in the ordinary, “these new monastics gather for prayer in disused pubs, youth clubs, in places of natural beauty, car parks, run down council estates, or the ruins of old monasteries. In doing so, they follow a Benedictine vision of re-monking the church.”⁶⁴
- The second group of new monastics identifies more with the friar tradition. While they are as committed to contemplation and worship as the first group, they desire to engage and transform the world rather than retreat from it. Instead of gathering in public places and then dispersing to their homes, “this second group tends to move into an area either as single households of pioneers or as intentional communities... The vision here follows the example of the Celtic wandering monastics, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, and is concerned to re-friar the church.”⁶⁵
- The third group has a vision that combines both the monk and friar models. These communities not only find spaces that can be temporarily used for sacred purposes; they create them. For example, Mosbsy’s community, The Moot Community in London, has adapted an old church building for use as an arts and café facility

with a team of people offering radical hospitality, and with all sorts of things going on in it including workshops on contemplative spirituality, discussions, art as mission events, prayer and forms of worship. We are seeking to create a sacred space for people to pilgrimage to, coming from a more monkish vision. But alongside this the community seeks to establish an intentional community, hoping eventually to take on accommodation that can house a number of people. We seek to realize that vision of daily prayer and shared living, a base from which we can be sent out to seek social transformation and justice – a more friar-like vision.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 407.

⁶⁵ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 415.

⁶⁶ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 418.

Commitment to the Community of Faith

Although solitude is a necessary practice in faith formation, human beings also need community to flourish spiritually. Early on, it became the general practice of the ascetics of the desert to “moderate their aloneness by submitting to the spiritual direction of others... instead of living alone, the [monks and nuns of Egypt] joined together in communities, retaining the privacy of their cells but otherwise working and praying together under the direction of an abbot.”⁶⁷ Over time, these communities began to establish rules that fostered order, stability, and a life of virtue, the most famous and prevalent of which was the Rule of Saint Benedict:

We intend to establish a school for God’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love... As we progress in this way of life and faith, we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love... Faithfully observing God’s teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in the eternal presence.⁶⁸

Those who desired to join the monkhood would, after a year of observation and instruction, come before the whole community and take up three vows, promising stability, fidelity to the monastic life, and obedience.⁶⁹ In return, they received the warmth, support, and accountability of a community of disciples who were similarly devoted to a life of faith and service.

The two defining features of monastic communities were the election of an abbot and the adoption of a “rule of life.” Benedict of Nursia condemned monastics who, desiring to be free from any form of accountability or permanence, refused to live under any such restrictions, accusing them of having a “character as soft as lead... slaves to their own wills and gross

⁶⁷ Rapley, 104.

⁶⁸ Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2010), 21.

⁶⁹ Chittister, 249.

appetites.”⁷⁰ A chief aim of monastic communities is to cultivate humility in its members; consequently, godly submission, self-abnegation, and mutuality are indispensable virtues. This way of thinking is somewhat of an anathema to our modern American independent sensibilities.

The abbot bore a tremendous burden in the monastery, “holding the place of Christ,” aware that “at the judgment of God, not only their teaching but also the community’s obedience [would] come under scrutiny.”⁷¹ However, Sister Joan Chittister, an American Benedictine nun, explains that responsibility for the community’s spiritual vitality was shared by all: “Abbots and prioresses are to teach, to proclaim, but the community’s responsibility is to listen and to respond. Benedict wants a community that is led, but not driven. The concept is clear: people are not acquitted of the responsibility for their own souls.”⁷² The monastery is not “a royal court, a military barracks, or a detention home... The purpose of Benedictine spirituality is to gather equally committed adults for a journey through earthen darkness to the dazzling light that already flames in each of us, but in a hidden place left to each of us to find.”⁷³

The abbot or prioress is not to live above the group, but rather is to embody its values and ideals, to live in such a way that he or she may credibly say, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”⁷⁴ Sister Joan stresses the spiritual nature of the abbot’s role: “A monastery does not have to be wealthy, a monastery does not have to be large, a monastery does not have to be popular. What a monastery must be, without doubt and without fail, is holy.”⁷⁵ This is an important word for pastors and overseers in a time who feel pressured to respond to the emptying of their churches. The leader’s task is not to fill pews, but rather to join God in renovating hearts. Their

⁷⁰ Chittister, 29-30.

⁷¹ Chittister, 35.

⁷² Chittister, 36.

⁷³ Chittister, 36.

⁷⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:1, NKJV.

⁷⁵ Chittister, 48.

primary concern ought to be the spiritual condition of their people over the outward success of the organization. What a district community must be, without doubt and without fail, is holy.

A Rule of Life is not a strategic plan; rather, it is a social contract for a community, defining its spiritual rhythms, division of labor, and treatment of its members. What is its purpose? What is each person's role? What shall they do each day, how shall they do it, and why? How will they care for one another? These are questions that every community of faith should ask, but often fail to answer with sufficient clarity for all. A well-crafted rule helps bind members around a common purpose and creates a spiritual scaffolding that can support a genuine life of faith.

Participation in Mission

Alongside monastic communities, mendicant orders have also played a vital role in preserving and propagating the faith. Although Benedictines were instrumental in evangelizing medieval Germany, Rapley notes that in their early days, "Benedict's monks were not expected to be useful to society, either by teaching or by preaching or even by intercessory prayer. Their only aim was to serve God and to save their own souls, always within the closed circle of their community."⁷⁶ Eight hours a day were dedicated to singing, reading, praying, and teaching. Several more were given to various kinds of manual labor.

Then, in the thirteenth century, there appeared a new tribe of religious persons, the friars. Consciously, audaciously, these men took their religious life into the world, contending that God is served best when prayer is combined with the saving of souls, in what they called "the mixed life." "Leave God for God" was their rallying cry; this opened a door through which hundreds of

⁷⁶ Rapley, 186.

future orders, male and female, would pass. From that point on, there were two main forms of religious life, the contemplative and the active.⁷⁷

Similarly, some manifestations of new monastic communities are more concerned with mission than others. While some seek to reform the church in ways that increase their capacity to reach outsiders, others desire to reinvent the church so they may express their own spirituality more authentically. Nevertheless, while “new monasticism is not automatically connected to a missional motive, to the extent that it enables Christians to be authentic disciples in a changing culture, it can only enhance the mission of God through the Church.”⁷⁸

A commitment to mission is central to Nazarene identity. Thus, we would do well to learn from missionally-oriented orders such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, and the Missionaries of Charity. Ignatian spirituality, for example, is an activist faith designed for life on the world’s cultural frontiers, meant to be practiced in the world, not apart from it, flexible yet robust, well suited to the missionary life.⁷⁹ St. Ignatius of Loyala, founder of the Jesuit order, often ended his letters to Jesuits going to the missions with the expression, *ite, inflammate omnia* – “Go, set the world on fire.”⁸⁰ To this day, the Jesuit General Congregation’s decree on the Jesuit charism is called “A Fire That Kindles Other Fires,” a testament to the enduring passion and zeal of the Society of Jesus.⁸¹

In addition to monastic and mendicant traditions, a third kind of religious community has particular relevance for our modern context, in which people are increasingly dispersed yet tethered to one another through technology. The *skete* communities of Egypt were one of the

⁷⁷ Rapley, 37-42.

⁷⁸ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 306-317.

⁷⁹ Chris Lowney, *Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads: Lessons from the First Jesuit Pope* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2013), 85.

⁸⁰ Jim Manney, “Go Set the World on Fire.” May 2, 2018. Accessed December 18, 2024. Ignatian Spirituality. <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/go-set-the-world-on-fire>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

earliest expressions of monastic life, usually consisting of a small number of cells or caves used as living quarters with a centralized church or chapel.⁸² Philip Roderick, founder of The Quiet Garden Movement, Contemplative Fire, and Hidden Houses of Prayer, asks: “How do we combine the desire to communicate and belong, with the need for personal space?” Like the *sketes* that inspired them, Roderick leads a community of people living in “separate but invisibly linked homes – cabins, caravans, houses, homesteads, flats, or farms, [yet] hungry and thirsty to live the mystery of life in Christ... Participants in the *skete* choose to pattern their lifestyles to allow a high degree of aloneness and yet a real sense of interconnectedness and common cause on the spiritual journey.”⁸³ The loosely structured communal rhythm of the *skete* may be more applicable to our modern context than the regimented and cloistered life of traditional monastic orders. For regional overseers, the idea of calling people separated by geography, language, and culture to order their lives around a common set of values and practices may have difficulty gaining traction. Nevertheless, “a dispersed community or order has to find appropriate regular patterns of connection or it will disperse finally. Shared patterns of prayer, often digitally supported, [may] sustain a shared rhythm at a distance.”⁸⁴ The fact that believers are dispersed does not mean they cannot grow together in Christlikeness or participate in shared mission in meaningful and generative ways.

Religious orders have not only helped spread the faith; they have also been responsible for creating a better world and invited ordinary people to join them in such work. The 16th and 17th centuries, charitable confraternities known as oratories provided a space for both clergy and laity to deepen their spiritual lives through prayer while ministering to the poor together. The

⁸² “Skete.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, July 20, 2021. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skete>.

⁸³ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 1982.

⁸⁴ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 2287.

oratories produced many devoted laymen and laywomen who served in orphanages, worked in hospitals for incurables, and cared for girls and women who had been victimized during war. Oratories also served as springboards, “launching both men and women into more ambitious, more structured ministries.”⁸⁵ Returning to our compassionate roots is not only a faithful expression of Christian love for God and neighbor; it is also an effective means of spiritual formation, leadership development, and evangelistic witness. Pastors and ecclesial overseers must keep mission at the forefront of the life of our communities. The contemplative life must lead naturally to the missional life. Therefore, we ought to consider the many ways in which both the monastic and mendicant streams have facilitated creative and effective mission to outsiders.

Not all religious orders are known to us; many existed for a brief moment before disappearing from history. Few, if any, have remained untouched by greed, controversy, or political entanglements. Religious orders served as the strong arm of the Church during the Crusades and the Inquisition. And yet, they have also positively guided and resourced the church since the earliest days of Western civilization. The monks, friars, and mystics have been society’s “evangelizers, its thinkers, its writers, its learned professors, its ambassadors, its explorers, its writers, its schoolteachers, its hospitallers, its welfare workers.”⁸⁶ Although in the West, the presence of the orders has diminished so as to be largely invisible, Rapley reminds us that “they are flourishing in other parts of the world, above all in Africa and in Asia. The best-known religious order of the twentieth century was founded in Calcutta, and its members were the sari. They continue to attract members to their side.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Rapley, 1959-67.

⁸⁶ Rapley, 4815.

⁸⁷ Rapley, 4850.

Discipleship in the Early Church

Spiritual formation is appropriately understood to be the task of the local church. As the saying goes, however, “results may vary.” There is a lack of clear consensus among the 45,000-plus (and counting) Christian denominations in the world regarding what it means to be a disciple, let alone how to make one.⁸⁸ The church’s approach to spiritual formation has not always been so diverse. By and large, for the first 300 years of the church’s history, adherents underwent a well-established process of spiritual formation that helped them to present a consistent, credible, and compelling witness in the world. While modern middle judicatories may not be positioned to replicate such a process beyond their own borders, they do have the autonomy, connectedness, and resources necessary to foster a more robust culture of discipleship within their own community. Returning again to the life of the early Christians, what can the modern church learn about the work of discipleship that may be applied to its own context?

Regarding the improbable rise of Christianity, Mennonite historian Alan Kreider asks, “Why did this minor mystery religion from the eastern Mediterranean - marginal, despised, discriminated against - grow substantially, eventually supplanting the well-endowed, respectable cults that were supported by the empire and aristocracy? What enabled Christianity to be so successful that by the fifth century it was the established religion of the empire?”⁸⁹ Aside from the early Christians’ compelling message, religious zeal, and displays of spiritual power, Kreider points to four reasons for the church’s surprising growth: (1) patience, (2) *habitus*, (3) catechesis and worship, and (4) ferment.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ “Quick Facts About Global Christianity.” Center for the Study of Global Christianity. (2024, June 7). <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts>

⁸⁹ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*. (Ada, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 1.

⁹⁰ Kreider, 1-3.

Although patience was not a virtue dear to Greco-Roman people, it was vitally important to the early Christians. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Cyprian each wrote detailed treatises on patience, believing it to be a central attribute of God and therefore a distinctive sign of the Christian. According to Tertullian, “God is the exemplar of patience. God is promiscuously generous; he shares the wonders of creation, the brilliance of the sun and seasons, with everyone - the just and the unjust alike (Matt. 5:45). God endures ungrateful, greedy people who worship idols. God does not compel belief, but by his patience he hopes to draw them to himself.”⁹¹ As beneficiaries of God’s patient, noncoercive love, believers are to embody patience in their own lives; in the words of Cyprian, patience “tempers anger, bridles the tongue, governs the mind, guards peace, extinguishes the fire of dissension, restrains the power of the wealthy, and teaches us to pardon our offenders quickly and to ask pardon of others.”⁹² Christians who practiced this kind of patience stood out within their culture, just as they undoubtedly do in today’s increasingly impatient, angry, and divided times.

Kreider agrees with French reflexive sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that our *habitus* is an essential component of spiritual formation. *Habitus* refers to the “corporeal knowledge,” or “system of dispositions that we carry in our bodies.”⁹³ It is formed by the example of our parents, peers, and role models, by the narratives of our family, community, and culture, and most of all, through repetition, “by the sheer physicality of doing [certain] things over and over so that they become habitual, reflexive, and borne in our bodies.”⁹⁴ Kreider explains that,

Christian communities worked to transform the *habitus* of those who were candidates for membership - tinkering with their wiring, or even attempting a more far-reaching rewiring - by two means: catechesis, which rehabilitated the candidates’ behavior by means of teaching and relationship (apprenticeship); and worship, the communities’

⁹¹ Kreider, 21.

⁹² Kreider, 30.

⁹³ Kreider, 39.

⁹⁴ Kreider, 40.

ultimate counterformative act, in which the new *habitus* was enacted and expressed with bodily eloquence.⁹⁵

Why was the *habitus* of the early church so integral to their witness? While the modern church often treats worship services as an evangelistic opportunity and entryway into the Christian community, nonbelievers were not encouraged to participate in the worship of the early church; in fact, they were forbidden from doing so, for reasons to be explored momentarily.

What the outsiders saw was not the [Christians'] worship, it was their *habitus*. According to Tertullian, the outsiders looked at the Christians and saw them energetically feeding poor people and burying them, caring for boys and girls who lacked property and parents, and being attentive to aged slaves and prisoners. They interpreted these actions as a “work of love.” And they said, “Vide, look! How they love one another.” They did not say, “Aude, listen to the Christians’ message”; they did not say, “Lege, read what they write.”⁹⁶

What does the *habitus* of the church today communicate to her neighbors? If the credibility of Christians’ witness is to be restored, the church must give careful and sustained attention to how believers live out our faith with their bodies (not just their minds or their mouths), with real people, in real time, in the real world. In addition to *believing* or *saying* the same things (which seems hard enough already), can a district community also commit to *doing* the same things for the sake of presenting a unified, beautiful witness to the character of God and the culture of heaven?

The primary means by which the early Christians worked to transform people’s *habitus* was through catechesis and, at the appropriate time, worship. Those shaped by the modern church growth movement might be surprised to learn that “the third-century churches described

⁹⁵ Kreider, 41.

⁹⁶ Kreider, 61.

by the Apostolic Tradition did not try to grow by making people feel welcome and included. Civic paganism did that. In contrast, the churches were hard to enter... [Since] the church's primary witness was a product not of what Christians said but of how they lived, the community was rightly careful not to admit new people too quickly whose behavior compromised the Christians' distinctive attractiveness."⁹⁷

Those desiring to join the church were required to submit to a thorough, inconvenient, and often costly process of training and examination. Interested applicants were presented to the church's teachers by a sponsor who vouched for their teachability and likelihood of presenting a good witness (the First Scrutiny). Those admitted to the catechumenate were subsequently schooled in the faith and practices of the church, a process which could last three years or more, concluding only when their sponsors testified that their thinking, behavior, character, and reflexes had genuinely changed (the Second Scrutiny). When they were deemed ready, catechumens were prepared for baptism through more teaching and repeated exorcisms. "When the day of baptism approached, the bishop himself exorcised each candidate so that he knew that each one was holy, good, and undefiled. This was the Third Scrutiny, and it was decisive."⁹⁸

Kreider identifies nine general elements of catechism in the early church: (1) Transforming the *Habitus*, (2) Avoiding Idolatry, (3) Learn the Master Narrative, (4) Learning the Teaching of Jesus, (5) Memorizing Biblical Passages, (6) Imitating Role Models, (7) Fostering a Culture of Peace, (8) Kinesthetics, and (9) Practical Issues. Without exploring these elements further, suffice it to say, our forebears took the task of spiritual formation seriously. It was not easy to become a Christian.

⁹⁷ Kreider, 149.

⁹⁸ Kreider, 181.

Though several Christian traditions still employ some form of catechesis today, the focus has largely shifted away from forming spiritual character toward delivering religious content. Compared to the methods used by our forebears, most of what passes for discipleship these days seems anemic and insufficient. A large church in the researcher's community offers prospective members a "Growth Track" with the promise that "in three simple classes, you can discover your purpose so you can make a difference!"⁹⁹ The first two sessions consist of online self-study video modules that can each be completed in just 45 minutes, followed by a final group class led by a staff member. How convenient! Presumably, this does not constitute the entirety of the church's process of discipleship. And yet, there are stark differences between how the early church made disciples and how it is often practiced today. Surely, a more patient, robust, *habitus*-shaping approach to spiritual formation would strengthen the church's collective witness.

To be sure, modern Christians live in a different world than their forebears. Most people living in the West do not really know, or even see, their neighbors. In fact, nowadays people can avoid most human interaction altogether by working from home, streaming our entertainment, shopping online, and ordering takeout. The *habitus* of modern Christians is a product of contemporary culture. It would not be practical or even helpful to graft the lifestyle of the early believers onto our own. And yet, for the church to become an alternate community of heaven today, it must intentionally "tinker" with believers' *habitus* under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Pastor and writer John Mark Comer points out that from the moment people awake each day, they are being continually formed by "a complex web of ideas, cultural narratives, reoccurring thoughts, habits, daily rhythms, spending patterns, relationships, family ties, activities, environments, and much more... there are forces - within and without - with a vested interest in

⁹⁹ "Growth Track: Fellowship Church." Fellowship Church. (n.d.). <https://www.tfcpeople.com/get-involved/growth-track#Get-Started>

us not becoming like Jesus. Therefore: All Christian formation is counter-formation.”¹⁰⁰ As James K.A. Smith puts it, “We can’t think our way to holiness.”¹⁰¹ Rather, people *live* their way to holiness by purposefully participating with God in their own renewal. In true Wesleyan fashion, the church must seek to “link the hands of doctrine and life - to close the gap between thought and act.”¹⁰²

Comer speaks of spiritual formation as apprenticeship to Jesus, or *imitatio Christi* (the imitation of Christ), as Thomas à Kempis and other monastic writers put it.¹⁰³ “Transformation is possible,” Comer argues, “if we are willing to arrange our lives around the practices, rhythms, and truths that Jesus himself did, which will open our lives to God’s power to change.”¹⁰⁴ Is it possible for a community as diverse and dispersed as a district to arrange their lives around the same practices, rhythms, and truths that Jesus did, together?

Comer observes that “spiritual formation in the North American church is often truncated to this three-part formula: Go to church. Read your Bible. Pray.”¹⁰⁵ However, these actions alone are not sufficient to produce people who have “been formed into the image of Christ for the sake of others.”¹⁰⁶ Comer joins the chorus of voices that are reviving the practice of committing to a *regula*, a rule of life, so that we may orient our lives around what matters most: God. David Brooks defines commitment as “falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters”¹⁰⁷; similarly, Comer says, “That’s what

¹⁰⁰ John Mark Comer, *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become Like Him. Do As He Did.* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2024), 117.

¹⁰¹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos, 2016), 5.

¹⁰² Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism, Second Edition.* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 2015), Kindle Edition Loc. 4645.

¹⁰³ Comer, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Comer, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Comer, 98.

¹⁰⁶ Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation.* (Lisle, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ Comer, 178.

a Rule is - a structure of behavior to support us ‘when love falters,’ to anchor our lives in something deeper than our fleeting emotions and chaotic desires.”¹⁰⁸ Can a district or a denominational *habitus* help its members to maintain fellowship with one another “when love falters” under the strain of external pressures or internal differences?

A good Rule of Life serves both to “guard our habits and guide our lives.”¹⁰⁹ Comer speaks of “anti-habits,” i.e. means of counter-formation. “A gardener has two jobs: tend the plants and keep out the weeds. In the same way, each of us needs to ask, What do I want to put into my life? and What do I want to keep out? Plus, What do I want to grow? and What do I want to die?”¹¹⁰ These are good questions for a district community to ask together. It might agree, for example, to grow in patience and die to impatience, or to put in humility and keep out narcissism, or to choose love and reject fear. Comer names nine core practices of his own community: sabbath, solitude, prayer, fasting, scripture, community, generosity, service, and witness.¹¹¹ James Bryan Smith outlines eight characteristics of the “good and beautiful community” of faith; we are called to be peculiar, hopeful, serving, Christ-centered, reconciling, encouraging, generous, and worshipful.¹¹² Certainly, either of these lists would provide a solid framework for developing a district community’s *regula*.

New Monasticism as a Response to Post-Christendom

Anabaptist scholar and missiologist Stuart Murray has written extensively on the challenges presented by post-Christendom, which is “the culture that emerges as the Christian

¹⁰⁸ Comer, 178.

¹⁰⁹ “Preamble.” A Rule of Life. Accessed January 15, 2025. <https://rule.praxislabs.org/preamble>.

¹¹⁰ Comer, 181.

¹¹¹ Comer, 242.

¹¹² James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community (The Good and Beautiful Series)*. (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 8.

faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.”¹¹³ Murray outlines seven transitions that accompany post-Christendom:

1. **From the center to the margins:** In Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
2. **From majority to minority:** In Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
3. **From settlers to sojourners:** In Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles, and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
4. **From privilege to plurality:** In Christendom Christians enjoyed numerous privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
5. **From control to witness:** In Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.
6. **From maintenance to mission:** In Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
7. **From institution to movement:** In Christendom churches operated mainly in an institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must become again a Christian movement.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018, Kindle Edition), 21.

¹¹⁴ Murray, 22.

Recognizing these dramatic shifts in the status of Christianity within a pluralistic culture and their implications for our work and witness, some believers have been quietly experimenting with new forms of worship, discipleship, and mission. These “new wineskin communities” share several noteworthy characteristics relevant to our current discussion:

1. **They seek to discern God’s activity in the world and participate accordingly.** Like the chiefs of Issachar listed among David’s army who “understood the times and knew what Israel should do,”¹¹⁵ new wineskin communities seek to enculturate the gospel and live out their faith in ways that are appropriate to their context. As German theologian Helmut Thielike put it, “The gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address because its recipient is repeatedly changing his place of residence.”¹¹⁶
2. **They seek to redress the abuses of the Church as Christendom.** In *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, Kristen Du Mez observes that “Across two millennia of Christian history... there is ample precedent for sexism, racism, xenophobia, violence, and imperial designs. But there are also expressions of the Christian faith... that have disrupted the status quo and challenged systems of privilege and power.”¹¹⁷ Ian Mobsby, Rector of Christchurch Blackfriars in London and a leading voice in New Monasticism circles, describes the countercultural spirit of such communities:

Our excitement and hope for new monasticism is that as a dynamic expression of church, it can redress the problems created with church in ‘Christendom’ mode, that is, one defined by power, privilege and wealth over people. Now, in our post-Christendom, postmodern and post-secular context, we are excited that the Church is rediscovering its call to a ministry of love, powerlessness, vulnerability

¹¹⁵ 1 Chronicles 12:32, NIV.

¹¹⁶ Tim Sudworth, Graham Cray and Chris Russell, *Mission Shaped Youth: Rethinking Young People and the Church*. (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), 11.

¹¹⁷ Kristen Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing, 2020, Kindle Edition), 13.

and service... From its birth, monasticism was a reaction against the abuses of the Church as Christendom, chiefly when it became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Christians deliberately went into the Syrian and Egyptian deserts to escape the oppression of church as 'dominant political society.'¹¹⁸

“It’s a season of unmasking, of veils lifted,” writes Cole Arthur Riley regarding the church’s need for repentance and renewal. “We are seeing our collective soul with a clarity that is disorienting. Listen for the apathy, the cruelty, and neglect. Then listen closely for all who dare resist.”¹¹⁹ A district community that takes seriously the need for re-formation will engage in this kind of deep soul searching together.

Given the current political and cultural climate in the U.S., it is worth mentioning what pastor and author Brian Zahnd writes about the prophetic witness of the church:

It’s not the task of the church to “make America great again.” The contemporary task of the church is to make Christianity countercultural again. Once we untether Jesus from the interests of empire, we begin to see just how countercultural and radical Jesus’ ideas actually are: Enemies? Love them. Violence? Renounce it. Money? Share it. Foreigners? Welcome them. Sinners? Forgive them. These are the kind of radical ideas that will always be opposed by the principalities and powers, but which the followers of Jesus are called to embrace, announce, and enact.¹²⁰

3. **They are deeply committed to discipleship.** The early church prioritized the spiritual formation of its members so that they might present a credible and compelling witness in the world. Many new wineskin communities have found the historical church to be a deep well of inspiration in this regard, reviving practices such as following a Rule of Life, praying the Daily Office, contemplative spirituality, going on pilgrimage, and spiritual direction. As mentioned earlier, some have described this phenomenon as the

¹¹⁸ Ian Mobsby, *A New Monastic Handbook: From Vision to Practice*. (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014, Kindle Edition), loc. 2155.

¹¹⁹ Cole Arthur Riley, *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Convergent Books, 2024), 41.

¹²⁰ Brian Zahnd. “Postcards from Babylon.” Brian Zahnd, 6 Oct. 2017, brianzahnd.com/2017/10/postcards-from-babylon.

“re-monking of the church.” Notably, new wineskin communities have a holistic view of discipleship. Mobsby explains that for them, “Conversion is about the whole of life. It is about changing our attitude not only to knowing God, but how we view our money, how we see marginalized people, how we interact with them, and how we respond to the call to participate in the ekklesia (church community) of love and fraternity. Conversion is far more than changing your ideas, it’s a lifestyle change.”¹²¹

4. **They are equally committed to mission.** “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” Jesus said to His disciples in the days following His resurrection.¹²² New wineskin communities take the Great Commission seriously, believing that the love of God compels them to share and embody that same love to their neighbors. Their understanding of mission, like their approach to discipleship, however, is not limited to “soul-winning”; rather, it is more holistic and expansive. Mobsy explains,

For new monastic communities, mission and evangelism is about transformation and growing – human becoming – in a culture that is losing a sense of what it means to be human, let alone what it means to be Christian. Mission and spiritual fulfillment have traditionally been seen as the fulfillment of going to heaven once you have died. New monastics are committed to a more transformative sense of salvation; the life and work of the Trinity in the present as well as the future. The good news of the kingdom is the transformation of individuals, communities, and culture; the coming of shalom.¹²³

It should not be surprising, then, that mission has a prophetic dimension for new wineskin communities that often results in works of advocacy, mercy, and justice:

Mission means first moving or at least moving one’s attention to the heart of the culture. Many are very committed to be present in the places participants of the community live. Some have deliberately moved to places abandoned by the Church of wider society such as inner-city estates which are tough to live in, with a vision of serving God and bringing God’s love to places where there is great social deprivation, poverty, and community breakdown. Some communities focus

¹²¹ Mobsby, 2355.

¹²² John 20:21, NIV.

¹²³ Mobsby, 2008.

more on those who are unwell, addicted or face spiritual impoverishment, who desperately seek meaning, belonging, and healing. In all there is the vision of the now, but not yet, kingdom of God, where mission is about catching up with what God is doing.¹²⁴

If new wineskin communities' approach to discipleship may be likened to "re-monking the church," their approach to mission may be described as the "re-neighboring of the church."

5. **They value and encourage participation from the whole community.** New wineskin communities favor a decentralized, participatory approach to leadership and service. This posture is certainly appropriate for believers belonging to the Wesleyan tradition.

Leonard Sweet reminds us that,

One of the most revolutionary features of the Wesleyan revival was its liberation of the laity for leadership, and its blurring of the lines between clergy and lay when it came to priestly functions and spiritual guides... Converts were trained to become soul-winners themselves. Many enlisted as lay preachers—some itinerant and others local. Many were appointed as leaders in their own society, and in addition to watching over their own flock, engaged in evangelistic activity in the neighbourhood.¹²⁵

Michael Adam Beck, Director of Fresh Expressions for the United Methodist Church, asserts that the practice of "one professional clergy person doing the work of evangelism to grow his or her flock is a bankrupt concept. The new missional frontier requires the whole people of God, the 'priesthood of all believers.'"¹²⁶ We would do well to recognize that "those among emerging generations who want to be engaged with the church are longing for more. They want to be involved in mission, meeting human need, and changing the world, but often have no desire to prop up declining institutions."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Mobsby, 1897.

¹²⁵ Leonard I. Sweet, *The Greatest Story Never Told: Revive Us Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 79.

¹²⁶ Michael Beck, *An Ecumenical Field Guide for Fresh Expressions*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2024, Kindle Edition), 31.

¹²⁷ Beck, *Ecumenical Field Guide*, 71.

Speaking of the role of monasticism in previous eras of significant re-formation, Elaine Heath, former professor of missional and pastoral theology at Duke Divinity School, points out that clergy did not lead these movements:

Most monks were lay people who responded to the perceived distance between the call of Jesus and the lack of a disciplined holy community in the church they experienced... The word clergy comes from the Greek word *kleros*, which means “lot,” or “that which is chosen by lot.” In other words, the clergy are the laity who have drawn the short stick. What the history of monasticism makes clear is that any renewal will come from “the people” of God.¹²⁸

6. **They are smaller and more intimate in nature.** New wineskin communities are often smaller in size. To borrow a phrase from the tech industry, this phenomenon is a feature, not a “bug.” Forming mature disciples requires patience and proximity, qualities which are harder to cultivate in large churches. There is evidence to suggest that the practical limit to the people with whom we can maintain stable social relationships is around 150 people.¹²⁹ Human beings flourish when they are connected to communities in which they can be authentically known, accepted, nurtured, and loved. While small churches come with their own share of challenges, they “play an important and valuable role in the religious landscape of America, [reaching] millions of young adults who have no interest in a larger church setting.”¹³⁰

New wineskin communities operate under the conviction that Christlike disciples are handcrafted in small batches, not mass-produced in an assembly line. Spiritual formation is necessarily grounded in love. To teach people to love like Jesus, believers

¹²⁸ Elaine Heath, Scott T. Kisker, *Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 16.

¹²⁹ “Dunbar’s Number.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 July 2024, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar%27s_number.

¹³⁰ “Small Churches Struggle to Grow Because of the People They Attract.” Barna Group, 12 Jan. 2024, www.barna.com/research/small-churches-struggle-to-grow-because-of-the-people-they-attract.

must *actually* love them like Jesus. In this respect, the intimate nature of small churches is conducive to the slow, patient work of discipleship. John Ortberg notes that “love and hurry are fundamentally incompatible. Love always takes time, and time is the one thing hurried people don't have.”¹³¹

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of common qualities among new wineskin communities. They also tend to be resourceful and resilient, experimental and creative, flexible and relational, “fluid at the edges yet deeply centered,” and “radical yet fully integrated into the local church.”¹³² For the purposes of our discussion, it is helpful to consider Alan Hirsch’s observation that “every historical renewal movement recovers some degree of the following movemental elements: priesthood of believers, “kingdom of God” over “church,” prophetic protest, church planting, mission on the fringes and among the poor.”¹³³ These convictions and commitments are attractive to those who struggle to find transcendence and meaning in “Church as Christendom.” Mobsby captures the aspirations of the New Monastics in this way:

We believe that in the midst of a culture whose primary commitment is to the self and consumerism, monasticism has something to offer ourselves, the rising numbers of the ‘spiritually curious’ and the many for whom life is painful and lacking in meaning about the project of being and becoming more human. And so, in our everyday clothes, we make these commitments to one another, to our church, and to living an ancient way of life in a radically different context.¹³⁴

On the Work of Missional Innovation

It was the witness of the early Christians, not their worship, that attracted their neighbors to their community, and ultimately, to Christ. They relied on catechesis to teach the basics of the

¹³¹ John Ortberg, “Diagnosing Hurry Sickness.” Christianity Today. www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1998/fall/814031.html. Accessed 10 Sept. 2024.

¹³² Mobsby, 89.

¹³³ Beck, *Ecumenical Field Guide*, 17.

¹³⁴ Mobsby, 39.

faith and form new adherents in the way of Jesus long before they were ever invited to participate in the worship of the community. And yet, the Sunday worship service has now become the primary (and sometimes only) means by which the modern church attracts and forms Christians. Outside of this gathering, many people do not participate in the life of the church in any consistent or meaningful way. Therefore, in our modern context, the weekly worship gathering must perform all the “heavy lifting” of discipleship, a task that seems all the more impossible in a time when only 30% of US adults (down from 42% just 20 years ago) attend religious services on any given weekend.¹³⁵

In a skeptical and secular age, the challenge before the church is not simply to make its worship more attractive, but rather how to make its faith more visible and its community more accessible. The traditional Sunday worship service no longer functions as the “front door” to the church (perhaps it never should have); the church needs new points of connection, spaces for community, and means of witness. In a noisy and distracted world, how can believers “let [their] light shine before others, that they may see [our] good deeds and glorify [our] Father in heaven” in ways that are genuine and not performative?¹³⁶ What alternate entryways might we create into the community of faith? In addition to developing our *habitus*, we must also reimagine our work. Alongside a commitment to spiritual formation, districts need to also foster a culture of missional innovation.

Michael Beck affirms what many of us already know: that “while the church of Jesus Christ will never die, the church as we know it is dying.”¹³⁷ So how does the church move forward, practically speaking? What does pursuing missional renewal look like in the life of the

¹³⁵ J.M. Jones, Jones, “Church Attendance Has Declined in Most U.S. Religious Groups.” Gallup.com. (2024, April 4). <https://news.gallup.com/poll/642548/church-attendance-declined-religious-groups.aspx>

¹³⁶ Matthew 5:16, NIV.

¹³⁷ Beck, *Deep Roots*, 17.

community? Citing his predecessor Dr. Chris Backert, Beck describes three primary paths through which churches attempt revitalization:

1. **Re-Engineering:** Looking at all the parts of a congregation's life and seeking to re-strategize, re-focus, or re-organize to make the current version of the congregation its best version.
2. **Re-Vival:** That occurs through a visitation of the charismatic, a movement of the Holy Spirit that manifests in a powerful supernatural way.
3. **Re-Missioning:** By awakening and practically focusing the efforts of the congregation on the Great Commission locally. Whereas Re-Engineering starts with the "church," Re-Missioning starts with the "commission." In Re-Engineering the church sets the agenda. In Re-Missioning the mission context sets the agenda.¹³⁸

Beck notes that most revitalization work is some variation of Option One, which is really just tinkering with the attractional model: "Doing church bigger and better; better coffee, better music, better preaching, better hospitality, and so on."¹³⁹ Option Two is always a possibility but is not something we can predict or manufacture ourselves. Option Three proposes that churches (and districts) can be revitalized by created a "blended ecology" in which inherited forms of church exist in a symbiotic relationship with fresh expressions, i.e. "forms of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church."¹⁴⁰ This integration of ancient practices with contemporary realities seems most appropriate for those involved in re-formation work. Andrew Hogue and L. Gregory Jones speak

¹³⁸ Beck, *Deep Roots*, 17.

¹³⁹ Beck, *Deep Roots*, 18.

¹⁴⁰ Beck, *Deep Roots*, 19.

of the need for Traditioned Innovation, “a way of thinking and living that holds the past and future together in a creative tension that enlivens our imagination and action in the present.”¹⁴¹

Creativity expert Len Wilson believes that innovation, properly understood, is essential to the witness and work of the church. The prevailing view of innovation is informed more by modernity than by Scripture and assumes that because something is new, it is inherently better. Christians, however, understand newness differently: “Christian innovation is what happens when, in faith, we participate in God’s ongoing work of the New Creation. Thus, the answer is to seek after Christ, to incarnate Christ. The work of Christian innovation isn’t just a matter of making something better. It is to give flesh and blood to Christ in our current culture. As culture changes, every generation is called to do this work.”¹⁴² Christians should not seek to create new expressions of church as part of a rebranding effort designed to attract a younger audience; rather, they ought to pursue innovation insofar as it helps them to better incarnate the love of Christ, fulfill the mission of the church, and embody the goodness of the New Creation.

Repairing our witness and revitalizing our mission in the world will require more than tinkering with our prevailing models of church. Believers will need to pursue what Wilson calls “First Order” innovation (disruptive change) which, once proven, lead to a series of “Second Order” innovations (incremental improvements) until the cycle of innovation has run its course and a new paradigm emerges.¹⁴³ George Day of the Wharton Business School notes that while on average, only 14 percent of organizational resources go toward ambitious, risky “Big I” innovation, such endeavors result in 61 percent of all growth.¹⁴⁴ What might happen if districts

¹⁴¹ Andrew P. Hogue, Gregory L. Jones, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2021), 39.

¹⁴² Len Wilson, *Greater Things: The Work of the New Creation*. (Plano, TX: Invite Press, 2021), 103.

¹⁴³ Wilson, 183. Elsewhere, Wilson notes that one sign of the end of an era of innovation is the presence of empires (188). Consequently, the researcher is convinced that as denominations mature and institutionalism inevitably sets in, creating space for, and even actively sponsoring, innovation becomes a missional imperative.

¹⁴⁴ Wilson, 182.

made a similar investment – say, 14% or more of their human, financial, and physical resources – in risky, “first-order innovation” expressions of the church that, though many might fail to take root, spur new growth, particularly among populations that are unlikely to be reached by other means?

Wilson emphasizes that innovation requires participation from the whole community. “Many people have recognized that the myth of a lone superhero or genius is unhelpful. If a problem calls for a truly original response, no one can know in advance what that response should be.”¹⁴⁵ The work of the leader, then, is not to come up with a vision and rally the people to execute it, but rather to create an environment where people are willing and able to do the hard work that innovative problem-solving requires. The leader is “less chess master and more gardener, whose primary purpose is not to move every piece but to create the ecosystem in which other leaders can grow.”¹⁴⁶

Innovation is inherently risky. “The attempt to make safety our highest value,” however, “is self-defeating... we try to remove risk, but we cannot. Bad things will happen. When our primary value is safety, we also get increased fragility, atrophy, and ultimately the very failure we so desperately want to avoid.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, “the first necessary condition for innovation is the willingness to make leaps guided by faith.”¹⁴⁸ Superintendents play a key role in creating this kind of culture. In addition to leveraging their influence to sway minds, protect innovators, and direct resources toward creative mission, as spiritual leaders, their primary task is to help the community to discern the will of God together and courageously move forward in obedience.

¹⁴⁵ Wilson, 199.

¹⁴⁶ Wilson, 202.

¹⁴⁷ Wilson, 167.

¹⁴⁸ Wilson, 162.

“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen,” Frederick Beuchner admits, yet the Lord says to His beloved: “Don't be afraid. *I am with you.*”¹⁴⁹

Design Thinking and the Church

How might a district community begin to think and act creatively? In *How to Try: Design Thinking and Church Innovation*, Lorenzo Lebrija explains how we can apply the same creative process taught by Stanford Business School and employed by the world's most innovative companies to our own work. In a nutshell, “Design thinking combines the approaches of design, management and science to solving a wide range of complex problems.”¹⁵⁰ In simple terms, the design thinking process consists of three steps:¹⁵¹

1. **Generating Insights.** In this stage, the goal is to discover the right design question. To do that, the team generates insights through conducting secondary research, making observations, having good conversations, and cultivating empathy.
2. **Developing Ideas.** Lebrija offers several ways to stimulate creativity. Once the group has completed this exercise, it selects one or two ideas to move forward with.
3. **Trying.** This stage is self-explanatory. The point is to take a leap of faith and say, “Let's try it.” Lebrija describes two key elements of the trying phase: forming a plan and building a prototype. From there, the project enters the Trying Cycle: trying, evaluating, and iterating.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ “Hope through Grace.” Frederick Buechner. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/hope-through-grace>.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Curedale, *Design Thinking: Process and Methods* (Los Angeles, CA: Design Community College Inc., 2019), 12.

¹⁵¹ Lorenzo Lebrija, *How to Try: Design Thinking and Church Innovation*. (New York, NY: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2021), 22.

¹⁵² Lebrija, 99.

Much more could be said about the design thinking process and how it applies to innovation in the church. For the purposes of this conversation, it is sufficient to say that leaders cannot ask people to try new things without also developing the necessary sense of safety, resources, and infrastructure to support such work. Districts must articulate a theology of innovation, establish a culture of generosity and risk-taking, invest human and financial capital in new ideas, protect (rather than punish) innovators, and encourage the participation of the whole community.

For Christians, innovation is about participating in the divine nature and embodying the good news of Jesus. We are not motivated to try new things because we are bored with the old. Nor, would Wilson argue, do we innovate “because we seek to ‘change the world.’ We are called to innovate because it is who we are as creative beings. We do not work eschatologically because we are trying to inaugurate some future end. We do it teleologically because the end has already been fulfilled in us through Christ’s resurrection.”¹⁵³

Think Slow, Act Fast

Danish economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg is one of the world’s leading experts on megaproject planning and development. In *How Big Things Get Done*, he notes the abysmal track record of big projects, the large majority of which end up failing to deliver the promised results (if they get done at all).¹⁵⁴ He and his co-author Dan Gardner ask the question, “What are the universal drivers that make the difference between success and failure?”¹⁵⁵ A chief

¹⁵³ Wilson, 237.

¹⁵⁴ Bent Flyvbjerg, Dan Gardner, *How Big Things Get Done: The Surprising Factors That Determine the Fate of Every Project, from Home Renovations to Space Exploration and Everything In Between*. (New York, NY: Crown Publishing, 2023), 8. The authors further note that, “In total, only 8.5 percent of projects hit the mark on both cost and time. And a minuscule 0.5 percent nail cost, time, and benefits. Or to put that another way, 91.5 percent of projects go over budget, over schedule, or both. And 99.5 percent of projects go over budget, over schedule, under benefits, or some combination of these. Doing what you said you would do should be routine, or at least common. But it almost never happens.”

¹⁵⁵ Flyvbjerg, xi.

contributor to the success of big projects is a pattern they call, “Think slow, act fast.”¹⁵⁶

Understandably, “Cultivating ideas and innovations takes time. Spotting the implications of different options and approaches takes more time. Puzzling through complex problems, coming up with solutions, and putting them to the test take still more time. Planning requires thinking - and creative, critical, careful thinking is slow.”¹⁵⁷ Once a project is underway, however, it is best to move quickly: “From the dramatic to the mundane to the trivial, change can rattle or ruin a project if it occurs during the window of time when the project is ongoing. Solution? Close the window. Put enormous care and effort into planning to ensure that delivery is smooth and swift. Think slow, act fast: That’s the secret of success.”¹⁵⁸

Big projects that are modular in nature also tend to have a higher rate of success. The Empire State Building, for example, is not so much a 102-story building as it is a stack of 102 largely identical one-story buildings. Flyvberg and Gardner explain modularity like this:

Get a small thing, a basic building block. Combine it with another and another until you have what you need... Repetition is the genius of modularity; it enables experimentation. If something works, you keep it in the plan. If it doesn’t, you “fail fast,” to use the famous Silicon Valley term, and adjust the plan. You get smarter. Designs improve. Repetition also generates experience, making your performance better. This is called “positive learning.” Repetition rockets you up the learning curve, making each new iteration better, easier, cheaper, and faster. As the old Latin saying goes, “Repetitio est mater studiorum” - Repetition is the mother of learning.¹⁵⁹

What can the church learn from how big things get done? First, some things – like the work of spiritual formation – require time. It is “slow” work. Others, like the work of missional innovation, require a willingness to move quickly, to “fail fast,” and apply learnings to the next iteration of the experiment. One also might ask, “What is the basic building block of a district, or

¹⁵⁶ Flyvberg, xiv.

¹⁵⁷ Flyvberg, 18.

¹⁵⁸ Flyvberg, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Flyvberg, 157, 163

the local church?” In the case of the former, it is the local congregation. In the latter, it may be a small group of 6-12 believers (John Wesley’s Class Meetings come to mind).¹⁶⁰ How do leaders ensure that each of these basic units is healthy and strong, and how do they “stack together” to make a whole?

Characteristics of Adaptive Communities

To recap, some characteristics that mark adaptive and innovative communities include:

- In the case of Christian organizations, the community does not seek to innovate for its own sake, but rather to join in the “greater things” that God is doing in creation.
- The community is able to recognize the difference between an adaptive challenge and a technical challenge and calibrate its response accordingly.
- Leaders admit when they don’t know what to do and “lead the learning that will lead to breakthrough.”¹⁶¹
- The community understands that the answers to the adaptive challenges they face lie both within themselves and outside themselves.
- The community is willing to make space for deep work. It “thinks slow and acts fast.”
- The community employs an iterative process of experimentation, prototyping, testing, and reflection (more on that later).
- The community embraces risk and failure as part of the creative process.

Our exploration of the work of the superintendency, the work of spiritual formation, and the work of missional innovation has informed the ensuing proposal for how district communities

¹⁶⁰ Mark Maddix, (2019, December 6). “John Wesley’s Small Groups: Models of Christian Community.” Good Shepherd United Methodist Church. <https://belonggsumc.com/john-wesleys-small-groups-models-of-christian-community>

¹⁶¹ Bolsinger, 22.

might revitalize their witness and renew their mission in an era of church decline and cultural change.

Chapter 3: Fit for Purpose: Thinking Differently About Districts

In this section, the researcher will offer a way of understanding the life and work of district communities, touching on issues of shared identity, values, purpose, culture, and practices. Next, we will explore the role of the district superintendent within his or her community. Finally, we will discuss five stages of work that a district community can engage in to advance the renewal of its collective witness and mission.

How a district community views its nature and purpose shapes its life together. In regard to identity, a healthy and helpful vision for a district community is threefold: a district may be understood as (1) a covenant community of faith, (2) a family on mission in the world, and (3) a blended ecology of both inherited and fresh expressions of the local church.

The District as a Covenant Community of Faith

Our theology, tradition, and polity support the idea that mid-level judicatories ought to be understood as a covenant community of faith. Our shared commitments to God, each other, and our mission are not borne out of administrative necessity, but rather of spiritual conviction. Christ is the head of the church, and we are the body; He is the vine, and we are the branches.¹⁶² He has created in Himself one new humanity; we are called to make every effort to preserve and embody this unity.¹⁶³ The New Testament writers spoke often of our obligation to fellow believers – to love one another, carry one another’s burdens, share with those in need, and not

¹⁶² Colossians 1:18, John 15:5.

¹⁶³ Ephesians 2:15, 4:3

forsake gathering with the body. These commitments do not start and end with the local congregation; they also extend to the regional and global family of faith.

Connectionalism is a central value for denominations belonging to the Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley recognized the need for “an organized system of communication and accountability and developed what he called the ‘connexion,’ a network of classes, societies, and annual conferences.”¹⁶⁴ In the United Methodist Church, “conferences provide the primary groupings of people and churches for discernment and decision-making... At every level of the connection, church leaders and members come together in conversation, or conferencing, to discuss important issues and discover God's will for the church.”¹⁶⁵ In *Nazarene Essentials: Who We Are, What We Believe*, the Church of the Nazarene explains that the denomination “is not a loose affiliation of independent churches, nor is [it] merely an association of churches having some commonality of belief and purpose but no real organic relationship. The church is unapologetically connectional.”¹⁶⁶

Though they may be geographically dispersed and culturally diverse, the members of a district are called – indeed, obligated - to support one another’s flourishing. As a covenant community of faith, they are entitled to expect certain things from each other. Regarding this commitment to mutuality, James Bryan Smith writes, “Here is the true narrative regarding the rights and responsibility of the community: The community exists to shape and guide my soul. The community has a right to expect certain behavior from me, and can provide the encouragement and accountability I need.”¹⁶⁷ Members of a district can and should expect kind,

¹⁶⁴ “Organization: The Church as Connection.” The United Methodist Church. Last modified June 24, 2013. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/organization-church-as-connection>.

¹⁶⁵ “Organization: The Church as Connection.” The United Methodist Church. Last modified June 24, 2013. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/organization-church-as-connection>.

¹⁶⁶ Church of the Nazarene, “Nazarene Essentials: Who We Are-What We Believe.” WHDL. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.whdl.org/en/browse/resources/7865>.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, James Bryan, 129.

warm, and gracious treatment from their fellow Nazarenes. They should expect active - enthusiastic, even - participation in connectional gatherings such as district assembly, zone meetings, retreats, and learning days. They should expect the community to come to their aid in times of crisis or need. They should expect each congregation to participate in the work of the global church through prayer, serving, giving, and sending. They should expect the community to submit to its elected leaders and to one another in holy love.¹⁶⁸

The District as a Family on Mission in the World

In Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in an Age of Accelerations, Thomas Friedman explores how technology, globalization, and climate change are reshaping our world at an unprecedented pace. The only way to lead exponential change in such a time, he argues, is to build a culture of community and collaboration, “particularly when addressing complex problems that span various sectors and geographies. Diverse and inclusive networks harness collective intelligence, leading to solutions that are more holistic and enduring.”¹⁶⁹

This culture is reflected in the polity of the Church of the Nazarene, which describes a district community as “an entity made up of interdependent local churches organized to facilitate the mission of each local church through mutual support, the sharing of resources, and collaboration.”¹⁷⁰ Note that the purpose that binds the community together is its mission. This is true for the superintendent as well: “We are agreed on the necessity of a superintendency that

¹⁶⁸ Hebrews 13:17, Ephesians 5:21.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas L. Friedman, “Thank You for Being Late.” Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://www.bookey.app/book/thank-you-for-being-late>.

¹⁷⁰ *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*, 117.

shall complement and assist the local church *in the fulfilling of its mission and objectives*” (italics mine).¹⁷¹

Mike and Sally Breen, founders of 3D Movements, observe that our understanding and practice of the *Missio Dei* (mission of God) has been influenced by Western individualism, giving rise to an individualistic methodology of mission.

We are individuals on mission. Think about it - even the most “missional” churches probably do something along those lines: we get together on Sundays to be inspired and encouraged, but when we are sent to go participate in the *Missio Dei*, we are sent as individual missionaries, trying to influence our workplace, struggling to make an impact in our neighborhood, attempting to be a solitary witness to our peers at school. If we're honest, this methodology isn't producing the same kind of fruit as we see in the book of Acts.¹⁷²

Pointing to the Trinitarian nature of God, however, the Breens argue that the church is meant to engage in mission *together*. “At the very center of God's nature is community. A family. God is family. And the God who is family is on mission. God himself is family on mission... Perhaps it's time to start talking about the *Missio Trinitatis*, the mission of the Trinity. As we do, we'll find our methodology shifts from individual missionaries doing the best they can to families on mission who demonstrate and proclaim a fuller picture of who God is.”¹⁷³

The District as a Blended Ecology

If, as Phyllis Tickle and Mark Dyers believe, the church is in the midst of another “500-year rummage sale,” such a radical transition will not take place overnight. As such, denominations will need to cultivate what Michael Beck calls a “blended ecology,” in which inherited forms of church exist in symbiotic, self-giving relationship with fresh expressions. Just

¹⁷¹ *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*, 39.

¹⁷² Mike and Sally Breen, *Family on Mission: Integrating Discipleship into the Fabric of Our Everyday Lives*. (Grand Rapids, MI:3D Ministries), 21.

¹⁷³ Breen, 22.

as the biblical creation story teaches that it is not good for individual humans to be alone; neither is it healthy for churches to exist or work in isolation. In the same way that adults well past child-bearing age are often deeply invested in the nurturing of their children and grandchildren, so too can congregations nearing the end of their life cycle find meaning and purpose in supporting new faith communities and ministries.

Beck notes that within the work of ecosystem cultivation, there are primarily three roles: “Pioneers: People who are passionate about mission to the edges, Supporters: People who are passionate about supporting and releasing pioneers, and Permission Givers: People who use their role to foster release of pioneers and to influence the system to be more willing to experiment.”¹⁷⁴ Obviously, superintendents are natural permission givers within the district community. However, successful ecosystem cultivation cannot happen without an abundance of pioneers and supporters. The whole community must participate in the work of renewal.

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Patrick Lencioni observes that in healthy organizations, members are willing to sacrifice their own interests for the good of the team. On the other hand, “the pursuit of individual goals and personal status erodes to focus on collective success.”¹⁷⁵ A mature community that prioritizes its long-term mission over short-term survival will generously share its time, money, people, buildings, and networks so that everyone is adequately resourced for ministry. It accepts that some churches may need to close so that others may be birthed. A community that is committed to renewal knows that infertility for a species means extinction. The church of God must be generative; disciples need to be making disciples; leaders need to be training leaders, and congregations need to be sponsoring congregations.

¹⁷⁴ Beck, *Deep Roots*, 59-60.

¹⁷⁵ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 23.

To be sure, cultivating this kind of self-giving, generative culture throughout a district community is a difficult task. Rather than deal with the challenges presented by ideological differences, cultural and linguistic barriers, and geographical distance, it seems easier to give the work of renewal solely to the local church. And yet, though “the crucible of community isn’t easy, with collaboration the yield of fruit is 10 times greater and 10 times sweeter.”¹⁷⁶ Ken Blanchard, a well-known business consultant, argues that “collaboration is a whole order of magnitude beyond teams. It’s in the DNA of the organizational culture. It’s the mindset of every member of the organization – the air the company breathes. It’s an environment that promotes communication, learning, maximum contribution, and innovation.”¹⁷⁷ Given the challenges facing the church today, district communities must be invested in one another’s flourishing. We must work together to repair our collective witness and renew our mutual mission. Just as the moral failure of one pastor or the collapse of an individual congregation can harm the reputation and ministry of the church across a region, so too can a thriving pastor or community have the opposite effect. We are one another’s keepers. We rise together, or not at all.

Some ways that district communities can cultivate mutuality and collaboration for the sake of renewal include:

- Adopting common language and rhythms through practices like praying the daily office together, preaching through the lectionary, using a common repertoire in music worship, encouraging the use of a daily devotional as a district community, and so on.
- Fostering collaborative relationships among the pastors and congregations within the same geographical areas (missional zones). For example, neighboring pastors could

¹⁷⁶ “SUMS Remix Newsletter, Vol. 35.” Auxano, www2.auxano.com/l/28802/2014-04-11/hwlp. Accessed 2 Sept. 2024.

¹⁷⁷ “Collaboration Starts with the Leader First.” The Vision Room, 14 Sept. 2017, www.visionroom.com/collaboration-starts-with-the-leader-first.

assist the superintendent in the ministerial search process when a church experiences transition. Congregations could hold joint worship gatherings, baptismal services, membership classes, retreats, workdays, or outreach events.

- As mentioned above, district communities could host periodic “think days” for the purpose of engaging in the deep work of prayer, reflection, learning, and innovation.

Cultivating a blended ecology in which inherited forms of church exist in symbiotic relationship with fresh expressions benefits the whole community. The effects we can see on inherited congregations are significant, according to Beck:

- (1) [Fresh expressions help] declining congregations to awaken from apostolic amnesia, look outside themselves, and listen to their community;
- (2) The congregation catches fire with the spirit of evangelism;
- (3) The “priesthood of all believers” is released as a local missionary force to offer adaptive leadership;
- (4) People who experience Jesus through fresh expressions sometimes matriculate back to the existing congregation; and
- (5) The church reorganizes itself around the new disruptive work of the Spirit taking place.¹⁷⁸

It must be mentioned that collaborating in the work of renewal is not a matter of mere practicality; it is a vital component of our identity and witness as God’s people. In other words, we do not work together in order to achieve more than we could alone – such a concept is widely understood and hardly novel – but because by doing so, we reflect something important about who God is and God’s vision for humanity. Irwin Ince, Coordinator of Mission for the Presbyterian Church in America, emphasizes that, “Only humanity in its entirety - as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and

¹⁷⁸ Beck, *Deep Roots*, 21.

the whole of creation - only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God.”¹⁷⁹

Envisioning a district as a covenant community speaks to its shared *identity*. Thinking of a district as a Family on Mission speaks to its collective *purpose*. And understanding a district as a blended ecology of both inherited and fresh expressions of the local church speaks to the *culture* that the community seeks to create.

Key Values and Practices of Communities in Renewal

We have explored some key values and practices of “New Wineskin Communities” and innovative organizations that ought to also characterize a district community in renewal. These include:

- 1. A Holistic and Redemptive Understanding of the Gospel.** The community preaches and embodies a gospel that includes both the salvation and sanctification of individuals as well as the transformation of society and culture. *Kirche In Aktion* (“Church in Action”), a collection of missional communities in the Rhine-Main area of Germany, captures this posture well in their vision, inspired by the Lord’s prayer: “to bring heaven on earth” in their cities.¹⁸⁰
- 2. A Universal Call to Mission.** The entire community is expected and empowered to participate in God’s mission; every member is aware of their own “sent-ness.” Kansas City Underground, a network of microchurches, reflects this ethos by calling its

¹⁷⁹ Irwyn Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*. (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020, Kindle Edition), 56.

¹⁸⁰ “Kirche in Aktion E.V.” Kirche in Aktion e.V. Accessed December 18, 2024. <http://churchinaction.com>.

community to establish a gospel presence, embody a gospel demonstration, and extend a gospel proclamation in their city.¹⁸¹

3. **A Culture of Mutuality.** The community shares knowledge, resources, and people with each other. Those who have been given much understand that the Lord requires more of them and from them.¹⁸² All in the body are given dignity and honor, especially those who are vulnerable or marginalized.¹⁸³
4. **Diversity and Belonging.** The community embraces and promotes diversity and belonging at every level, while intentionally removing barriers that might inhibit every individual and people group from participating fully in the life and mission of the church.
5. **Radical Generosity.** Like a circle of Coastal Redwood trees (which coincidentally grow almost exclusively within the bounds of the Northern California District Church of the Nazarene), “old growth” congregations generously support “new growth” congregations. Typically, the Church of the Nazarene has applied a three-part test to determine when a new church ought to be organized: Is it self-supporting? Is it self-governing? Is it self-propagating?¹⁸⁴ However, such an approach unfairly handicaps churches serving the urban poor, immigrant communities, and other financially or socially disadvantaged populations. While we understand that self-sustainability is dignifying, a district community that values collective renewal should be willing to give generously to support new work or ministry in challenging contexts.

¹⁸¹ “KC Underground Network.” KC Underground Network. Accessed December 18, 2024.
<https://kcunderground.org/>.

¹⁸² Luke 12:48.

¹⁸³ 1 Corinthians 12:22-25.

¹⁸⁴ Howard Culbertson, “The Three ‘Selfs’ of Indigenous Churches.” Accessed December 18, 2024.
<https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/3selfs.htm>.

- 6. A Discerning Community.** Disciples are, by definition, responsive people: they respond to the presence of God, to the call and commands of Jesus, to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and to the needs of a suffering world. James urges believers not merely to listen to the word of God, but to do what it says.¹⁸⁵ John asks, “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?”¹⁸⁶ The *regula* of a district community in renewal will include practices of both hearing and doing, of recognizing and responding to God’s will and our neighbors’ needs. Our *habitus* ought to reflect the character of our Lord, who, upon seeing us in our distress, moves toward us in holy love.
- 7. Making Space for Storytelling.** Pete Hughes writes in *All Things New: Joining God’s Story of Re-Creation*, “the story we live in is the story we live out.”¹⁸⁷ We have proposed that the superintendent must be the “keeper of the story” within a district, reminding people of the “big story” of Scripture, the *telos* of history as we have come to understand it. Within the community, however, there are many more “little stories” that lend authenticity, expression, and nuance to the bigger story of our faith - stories of God’s past faithfulness, present power, and future hope, told by many voices but animated by the same Spirit. Storytelling glorifies God, promotes understanding, dignifies others, binds the community together, and is a powerful means of witness.
- 8. A Desire to Gather Regularly and Purposefully.** Although district communities are diverse and dispersed, a district that values renewal will make time to pray, worship, fellowship, serve, and cooperate in mission together. Pastors and congregations are

¹⁸⁵ James 1:22.

¹⁸⁶ 1 John 3:17.

¹⁸⁷ Peter Hughes, *All Things New: Joining God’s Story of Re-Creation*. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishing, 2010), 5.

networked together locally and regionally. They adopt a rhythm of purposeful Christian conferencing and collaborating. They like being and working together, and it shows.

9. A Commitment to Deep Spiritual Formation. The community prioritizes deep, ongoing spiritual formation of its people. It gathers often to ask, “What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus in our time and context? How do we make more and better disciples? What can we learn from the historical church about the process of spiritual formation while adapting our methods to the realities of 21st century life?”

10. A Spirit of Missional Innovation. The community embraces risk and experimentation as part of its call to “become all things to all people, so that by all possible means [we] might save some.”¹⁸⁸ It creates space for people to engage in creative work and does not unfairly penalize them for failure.

On Developing a Discipleship Culture

In order to produce mature, devoted, Christ-like disciples, the church needs to offer more than a weekly religious experience consisting of a twenty-minute inspirational message, bookended by a few songs and the partaking of the Lord’s supper. We must invite and equip people to regularly cultivate the interior life, both alone and in community. Whether we gather in the ordinary, common spaces of our cities for contemplation, worship, and service, or whether we create new intentional communities that serve as a base camp for urban mission, we must call people to a much deeper encounter with God.

How can district communities cultivate this kind of deep-rooted spirituality? The following suggestions are offered as a starting point:

¹⁸⁸ 1 Corinthians 9:22.

- Leaders can share about their own efforts to cultivate the interior life through prayer, study, retreat, contemplation, confession, celebration, and spiritual direction.
- Superintendents can help congregations understand that retreating with God is one of the pastor's core responsibilities as a spiritual leader. As such, it is perfectly acceptable - encouraged, even - for a pastor to count this activity as "paid time."
- Promote time-honored practices such as the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. These exercises help us recognize God's presence and activity in one's life, so that we may learn to "desire and choose definitively in everything what will lead us to the end of our creation," namely, to "reverence and serve the Lord [our] God."¹⁸⁹
- Develop a network of trained spiritual directors that can lead pastors through the Spiritual Exercises, provide individual and group spiritual direction, or design guided retreat experiences for clergy.
- Identify retreat centers, camps, or vacation properties that may be used by pastors for personal and small group retreats at little to no cost.
- Redesign district-sponsored pastoral retreats as experiences that cultivate the interior life and Christian community, rather than as conference-style corporate events with plenary speakers and recreational activities. It may be worth considering holding smaller regional retreats with groups of 10-20 participants.
- Encourage district-wide participation in regular, seasonal rhythms of prayer, worship, study, and community inspired by the liturgical calendar, such as fasting during Lent, going through an Advent devotion series as a district, committing to an early morning

¹⁸⁹ Sean Salai, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola: With Points for Personal Prayer from Jesuit Spiritual Master* (Charlotte, NC: TAN Books, 2020. Kindle Edition), Loc. 618.

online prayer gathering once a week, and so on. While some congregations already incorporate such practices into their shared life, doing so as a district family helps foster a more regionally connected, consistent, and historically grounded spirituality. Many new monastic communities have adopted a common rule of life, believing that although “independence is a value of our culture, it is not a gospel value.”¹⁹⁰ Their rules are both a product of the monastic communities that have preceded them as well as our modern context; alongside traditional values of contemplation, hospitality, and economic sharing, the new monastics are also committed to racial reconciliation, creation care, and peacemaking.¹⁹¹ While there are some who have the virtues and gifts to lead and teach others, these relationships are not autocratic or paternalistic; rather, in these new communities, people understand that every adult is responsible for their own souls.

At the same time, superintendents have a responsibility to be “overseers of souls” within their communities. In our hyper-individualistic culture, how might a district community have a healthy understanding of what it means to submit to “an abbot and a rule” in the pursuit of a deeper life with Christ? First, pastors should be encouraged to model appropriate submission to their bishop or superintendent, who in turn ought to submit to their denominational overseers. Pastors who disrespect their superintendents or undermine their authority set a poor example for their flocks. At the same time, overseers must take very seriously their responsibility to care for those souls God has entrusted to their care, seeking to serve pastors whole-heartedly and humbly. As for encouraging people to commit to a shared rule of life, church leaders can begin by articulating the virtues that such a rule is designed to cultivate. A rule of life should be descriptive and actionable, naming the specific practices which the community will adopt, while

¹⁹⁰ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 735.

¹⁹¹ Cray, Mobsby, and Kennedy, 518.

maintaining some flexibility for individual implementation. Church leaders at both the local and regional levels can begin the process by casting a vision for a shared spiritual life, leading the community in discerning the virtues it hopes to develop, identifying specific practices for such a purpose, and then being the first to follow the rule, in plain view of everyone, beckoning others to join them in faithful and joyful obedience.

Engaging in works of compassion and justice are also a means of grace for a district community. Churches may consider reviving the tradition of charitable confraternities and oratories by establishing compassionate ministries in collaboration with their neighbors. In post-Christian contexts in which the church must work hard to regain the trust of her neighbors, finding tangible ways to contribute to the flourishing of the whole community is essential to our witness. At the regional level, leaders can direct substantial resources towards training congregations in compassionate ministry and developing a robust administrative infrastructure to support such work. In fact, in our current missional environment, districts may discover that planting compassionate ministry centers, from which worshiping congregations may later arise (as opposed to the other way around), is a faithful and effective strategy for revitalizing the church at large.

Rethinking the Nature and Work of the Superintendency

The researcher recently had a conversation with a pastor that illustrated how largely inconsequential the district superintendent is to the everyday life of the local church. They discussed the sharp decline of the church in the US and how helpless the researcher often felt to stop it. He wondered candidly if his churches felt like he was doing a poor job as their leader. The pastor seemed somewhat confused by his attitude and said, “I don’t think anyone expects

you to fix it. To be honest, most people don't know who you are or what you do. Historically, we've assumed the district superintendent has three basic responsibilities: (1) help fill pastoral openings, (2) be a pastor to the pastors, and (3) manage crises when they happen. Other than that, we don't give much thought to the DS at all." Once the researcher got over the initial jolt to his ego, he was struck by how this rudimentary (and to be honest, bland) understanding of the superintendency must change if districts are to experience renewal.

We have suggested here that the superintendent sits in the role of abbot over a dispersed community of faith, having been elected by its members to guide its shared life and mission together. A superintendent need not and cannot be an expert in all things; rather, he or she is a fellow sibling, servant, and sojourner with Christ. Tod Bolsinger writes that when navigating uncharted territory, "Perhaps the single most transformative moment of all is when a leader says, 'I don't know what to do,' and then goes about the hard work of leading the learning that will result in a new faithful action."¹⁹² In this spirit, bishops and superintendents who seek to lead their communities in the work of reformation and renewal fulfill at least four important functions in their communities. They are (1) keepers of the story, (2) prophets to the church, (3) incarnational signposts, and (4) conveners of the called.

The DS as a Keeper of the Story

Oscar-winning filmmaker Ron Howard says that the role of the director is to be the "keeper of the story."¹⁹³ He or she is responsible for ensuring that the hundreds of cast and crew members who help bring a script to life are working in unison to serve the film's overarching

¹⁹² Bolsinger, 22.

¹⁹³ "Ron Howard Teaches Directing." MasterClass. Retrieved May 11, 2022, from <https://www.masterclass.com/classes/ron-howard-teaches-directing/chapters/rh-introduction>

narrative. In the same way, to lead reformation work, overseers must be “keepers of the story.” They cultivate the collective imagination of their communities toward a clear and compelling picture of the kingdom of God and how we live as citizens of heaven. Overseers must ground this work in a clear theological vision that then informs missional strategy.

What is the “big story” of the gospel? The evangelical church has often espoused a partial understanding of the gospel that is primarily concerned with individual salvation. But God is also redeeming and renewing the entirety of creation, which is very good news indeed. In other words, the message of Christianity has often been misunderstood to be about how people can go to heaven rather than how God is bringing heaven to earth. However, the gospel that Jesus preached was that of the arrival of the kingdom of God. He told many parables about the kingdom, sent his followers out to share the good news of the kingdom, and taught them to prioritize the realization of God’s kingdom in their prayers. Dallas Willard notes that, “When Jesus directs us to pray, ‘Thy kingdom come,’ he does not mean we should pray for it to come into existence. Rather, we pray for it to take over at all points in the personal, social, and political order where it is now excluded: ‘On earth as it is in heaven.’”¹⁹⁴ This is the larger story that ecclesiastical leaders are tasked with keeping by directing their prayers, energies, influence, and skills toward calling their communities to participate in sharing and embodying this good news.

The work of re-formation requires a clear articulation of the attributes of God’s kingdom and how we live as its citizens and ambassadors. If the kingdom of heaven will not include hunger, sickness, suffering, or injustice, how might we pray and work toward creating such a world in the present? Overseers ought to paint such a vision for their districts, elevating kingdom values such as love, mercy, compassion, justice, hospitality, inclusion, equality, and grace.

¹⁹⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (NY: HarperCollins, 1998), 25-26.

Missional fruitfulness has less to do with numerical growth and more to do with whether our churches are producing disciples who display the fruit of a godly character (Galatians 5:22-23), the fruit of repentance (Matthew 3:8), and the fruit of good works (Colossians 1:10). These, not statistical benchmarks, are the marks of fruitfulness described in Scripture. Overseers must be careful not to focus on measures of success that are unreliable indicators of whether our churches are, in fact, making *Christlike* disciples in the world. We must “keep the story.”

Christianity owes much to those whose ability to articulate a compelling theological vision spurred significant reformation of God’s people. Jesus painted a portrait of an upside-down, countercultural kingdom in which the last would be the first and the meek would inherit the earth.¹⁹⁵ The apostle Peter borrowed the words of the prophet Joel to describe a world in which the Spirit of God would be poured out on all people – men and women, young and old – and urged his hearers to turn to Christ and receive this gift for themselves and their descendants.¹⁹⁶ Ignatius of Loyola called his community to a life of wholehearted service, teaching them to pray: “Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess, Thou hast given me: I surrender it all to Thee to be disposed of according to Thy will. Give me only Thy love and Thy grace: with these I will be rich enough, and will desire nothing more.”¹⁹⁷ In more recent times, civil rights icon and American Baptist preacher Martin Luther King, Jr. cast a clear and compelling vision of what a world rooted in God’s justice and equality looks like, and who challenged the church to help make this dream a reality. Note the theological moorings that anchor the call-to-action that King issues to God’s people:

¹⁹⁵ Matthew 20:16, Matthew 5:3.

¹⁹⁶ Acts 2:17-39.

¹⁹⁷ Salai, 4436.

The church has an opportunity and a duty to lift up its voice like a trumpet and declare unto the people the immorality of segregation. It must affirm that every human life is a reflection of divinity, and that every act of injustice mars and defaces the image of God in man. The undergirding philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the undergirding philosophy of our Judeo-Christian heritage, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together.¹⁹⁸

Not all overseers are gifted communicators, and the demands of the job often limit their ability to write regularly regarding the theological vision of their districts. However, we now have more tools than ever to help us “keep the story” that are easily accessible, have a wide reach, and cost next to nothing to produce. Ideas must be captured, circulated, and repeated in simple and memorable ways in order to shape culture. Toward this end, social media tools like X (formerly known as Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube can be leveraged for storytelling and spiritual formation. Overseers can easily convene their people through the use of videoconferencing. They can disseminate vision and generate conversation through the use of blogs and podcasts.

That being said, we are not called to be social media influencers, but rather overseers in God’s church. Casting vision will require much more than Facebook posts, blog entries, and speech-making. If we hope to reform the church, theological conviction must inevitably result in the reformation of the systems that impact the life of clergy and churches. Superintendents have a measure of institutional power within their communities. They oversee systems that can reinforce (or, if poorly designed, undermine) the theological vision of the district. How an overseer leverages power and the design of these systems tells a story. If, for example, that vision includes empowering women and people of color for every level of service, but a disproportionate number of White men occupy positions of local and district church leadership, it

¹⁹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010. Kindle Edition.), 105.

is likely that a systemic bias is undermining the community's efforts to reflect the diverse and egalitarian nature of the kingdom of God. Somewhere along the way, district leaders have failed to "keep the story."

The DS as a Prophet to the Church

In that vein, leaders tasked with the work of re-formation must be willing to speak hard truths to their own community. Truth-telling is necessary for conviction, confession, and repentance, all of which are part of the process of theosis. In this sense, ecclesial overseers fulfill a prophetic role within the context of the church, a responsibility which requires great humility, discernment, and courage. The United Methodist Church explicitly affirms this duty, believing that bishops are to be "a prophetic voice for justice in a suffering and conflicted world through the tradition of social holiness. The bishop encourages and models the mission of witness and service in the world through proclamation of the gospel and alleviation of human suffering."¹⁹⁹

It is easy to hear the prophetic voice in those who have done significant reformation work. Such leaders challenge the people of God to confront their own spiritual poverty and complicity in wrongdoing and aspire instead to a higher standard of devotion, truth, and kingdom ethics. In doing so, they help the church find the moral courage to "love mercy and do justice" in the world.²⁰⁰ Again, Martin Luther King, Jr. is an example of a prophetic leader who did not hesitate to rebuke God's people and call them to repentance. Observe the unequivocal nature of his warning to the church:

The church as a whole has been all too negligent on the question of civil rights. It has too often blessed a status quo that needed to be blasted, and reassured a social order that needed to be reformed. So the church must acknowledge its guilt, its weak and vacillating

¹⁹⁹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), 330.

²⁰⁰ Micah 6:8.

witness, its all too frequent failure to obey the call to servanthood. Today the judgment of God is upon the church for its failure to be true to its mission. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.²⁰¹

Archbishop Óscar Romero, who was assassinated for denouncing the human rights abuses of the right-wing military dictatorship in El Salvador, asked rhetorically, “A church that does not provoke crisis, a gospel that does not disturb, a word of God that does not rankle, a word of God that does not touch the concrete sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed - what kind of gospel is that?”²⁰² The late Tim Keller, former pastor of Redeemer Church in New York City, spoke out against political idolatry in the church, writing: “When the church as a whole is no longer seen as speaking to questions that transcend politics, and when it is no longer united by a common faith that transcends politics, then the world sees strong evidence that Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx were right, that religion is really just a cover for people wanting to get their way in the world.”²⁰³

Those who desire to engage in reformation work ought to discern whether their cause is motivated by the prevailing social and cultural attitudes of the day or by the “big story” presented in the Scriptures and the macro themes contained therein: good and evil, love, holiness, justice, dignity, and the value of life. Though we can and should speak to contemporary issues, leaders must connect their work to the ongoing redemptive activity of God. Some of the recurring themes in Scripture and human history that must be addressed in every time and culture include the misuse of power and authority (especially within the church), exploitation of the poor and vulnerable, chronic injustice and lack of compassion, idol worship, religious syncretism, and

²⁰¹ King, Jr., 102.

²⁰² Aarik Danielson, “The Scandal of Oscar Romero’s God.” Retrieved Feb. 8, 2025 from <https://sojo.net/articles/scandal-oscar-romero-s-god>.

²⁰³ Timothy Keller (2022, January 21). “Justice in the Bible.” Retrieved May 15, 2022, from <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible>

our propensity toward trusting in charismatic but flawed human leaders instead of God. The concerns that Jesus and the prophets had about the people of God ought to be our concerns as well. If we view our current world through such a lens, it is not difficult to identify some of the contemporary issues that require a prophetic response from and to the church: religious nationalism, political partisanship, the impact of unchecked capitalism, chronic inequality and injustice related to gender, race, and socioeconomic status, and a lack of concern for the plight of the poor, orphans, refugees, and the incarcerated, just to name a few. Keller names several of the cultural idols that seduce both believers and nonbelievers alike follow: money, sex, success, power, and less obvious ones such as cultural imperialism, religious moralism, and self-actualization.²⁰⁴

It is important to remember that reformation work is primarily about the work of theosis within the church itself. Rather than rail against the corruption in our surrounding culture, overseers would be wise to focus their energies on addressing the sin within their own camp so that their communities might be a more credible witness in the world. Of course, the message and ministry of prophets is not always welcomed. Jesus warned his disciples that living a righteous life would sometimes result in persecution: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”²⁰⁵ Therefore, overseers need to brace themselves for resistance and even sabotage from their communities as they seek to lead change.

²⁰⁴ Timothy Keller. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009).

²⁰⁵ Matthew 5:11-12 NIV.

Edward Friedman speaks of leaders who experience a “failure of nerve” in the face of opposition. To remain steadfast to their cause, leaders must have a deep awareness of God and self, theological clarity, and moral courage. Friedman notes that there is “a widespread misunderstanding about the relational nature of destructive processes in families and institutions that leads leaders to assume that toxic forces can be regulated through reasonableness, love, insight, role-modeling, inculcation of values, and striving for consensus. It prevents them from taking the kind of stands that set limits to the invasiveness of those who lack self-regulation.”²⁰⁶ Overseers must understand, then, the limitations of research, rhetoric, and reasonableness, relying less on their own powers of persuasion and resting instead in their God-given identity and convictions. Leaders need to have a firm grasp of their own values and operate from a principled center so that power is not leveraged to bad actors, but rather is shared with those who are healthy, gifted, and motivated to help the organization succeed. A leader’s presence is often far more important than his or her technical prowess. In other words, those who desire to engender reform in the church need to be comfortable leading in their own skin.

The DS as an Incarnational Signpost and Exemplar of the Faith

To lead change, overseers in the church must do more than articulate theological vision and speak prophetically to their communities; they must also embody those ideals in their relationships, conduct, and way of life. Citing Gordon Lathrop, Jeren Rowell asserts that the pastor is a “symbol among symbols” in the life of the church; if so, then this is even more true of

²⁰⁶ Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2017. Kindle Edition), 23.

clergy serving in higher positions of authority.²⁰⁷ “Good pastoral life and work means living from rich and prayerful study of the Scriptures so as to become *in the whole of one’s life* a sign of the presence of the Good Shepherd in the midst of God’s people. This living sign is known not only through the activities of presence, listening, and counsel but especially through the pastor’s ability to articulate and model a biblical vision for discipleship and mission.”²⁰⁸ However, as previously noted, embodying the values and vision of the community is made difficult by the inability of overseers to be seen and known with any real depth by their people. The pastors and churches under their care rarely assemble in one place and are often separated by distance, culture, and language. Therefore, overseers must find creative ways to be known by their people. To be a “symbol among symbols,” overseers need to approach their role in ways that are:

1. ***Incarnational.*** Overseers cannot lead solely from behind a desk, from the boardroom, or through a computer screen. They need to be with people in the flesh, to talk with them, eat with them, pray and worship with them, laugh and cry with them, to be seen and touched and even loved. This is, after all, the example set before us by our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose image we are being re-formed, and indeed by the Triune God, who lives and moves in concert and as a community. Incarnational leadership is a visible reminder of the *Missio Trinitatis* – the mission not of the individual, but of the family of God.
2. ***Itinerant.*** Overseers should display a preference for visiting people in their own context rather than requiring them to come to the regional office. Not only does this practice demonstrate a posture of humility and service, but it also allows the overseer to better

²⁰⁷ Jeren Rowell, “Pastoring in a Pandemic: They Didn’t Teach Me This in Seminary.” Nazarene Theological Seminary. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from <https://www.nts.edu/pastoring-in-a-pandemic-they-didnt-teach-me-this-in-seminary>

²⁰⁸ Diane Leclerc, Mark A. Maddix, *Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2014), 223.

understand the communities in which their people serve. Rowell believes that an itinerant superintendency is itself a sign of God's holy and self-giving nature: "As God moves toward us in love, so those called to and charged with oversight in God's church should move toward the people of God in love rather than employing models of leadership that become hierarchical and deferential."²⁰⁹

3. ***Participatory.*** The longer overseers serve in their roles, the greater the risk that they will become out of touch with the daily realities of local church ministry. When possible, they should not only visit their people, but also participate in the life of the local church with them. Overseers can stay close to the front lines of mission by serving alongside their people – at the food pantry, at the district youth camp, in the prisons, at the addiction recovery center, at the church clean-up day, wherever God is at work in and through the local church. People need to see their superintendent has hands as well as a mouth.

Sister Joan Chittister points out that "What we do not live we do not have a right to require. The function of spiritual leadership is not to exert power over the community, but rather to enshrine what a good life can be."²¹⁰ Though it is challenging for superintendents to remain connected to their people, true relational equity can only be built through face-to-face interaction. Overseers can utilize social media, chat groups, newsletters, and other such avenues to increase their visibility. However, author Simon Sinek cautions that "trust is not formed through a screen; it is formed across a table. It takes a handshake to bind humans... and no technology can replace that."²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Leclerc, 222.

²¹⁰ Chittister, 39-40.

²¹¹ Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 140.

When under stress, leaders may tend to revert to ways of thinking and working that run counter to the values of the kingdom. Superintendents may experience pressure to “boost the numbers” in their districts so they can present a narrative of success rather than decline. In such a climate, leaders may begin to show a preference for control, productivity, and efficiency over virtues such as patience, faithfulness, and love. Alternatively, overseers can embody a different set of values that better reflects the countercultural nature of God’s kingdom. For example:

- ***We can reward effort over results.*** Two congregations may be equally faithful without being equally fruitful. However, Jesus’ telling of the Parable of the Talents indicates that God rewards us according to the former and not the latter.²¹² However, denominations often celebrate churches on the basis of their size or statistical growth rather than for their faithful and often sacrificial obedience. Leaders who celebrate effort over results embody the character of God, who commends His servants not for their fruitfulness, but for their faithfulness, and invites them to share in their master’s happiness.
- ***We can slow down and value Sabbath, solitude, and silence.*** Quoting Dallas Willard, John Mark Comer exhorts believers to “Ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life. Hurry is the great enemy of the spiritual life.”²¹³ Rich Villodas writes that, “The desert fathers, mothers, and later monastics remind us that the way of following Jesus requires a steadfast refusal to get caught up in the pace, power, and priorities of the world around us. We are called to have our lives shaped by a different kind of power,

²¹² Matthew 25:14-30.

²¹³ John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry: How to Stay Emotionally Healthy and Spiritually Alive in the Chaos of the Modern World*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Multnomah Publishing Group, 2019), 19.

pace, and priorities, offered to us by God.”²¹⁴ An unhurried, well-rested leader is a cultural anomaly, a citizen and signpost of a different kingdom.

- ***We can live and lead in a non-anxious manner.*** Steve Cuss asserts that “part of [leading] systemic change is learning to be a non-anxious presence in a highly anxious environment.”²¹⁵ When leaders are able to manage their own anxiety and that of others, they are in fact engaging in the work of theosis. “Anxiety shrinks the power of the gospel because it presents a false gospel - one of self-reliance rather than reliance on God. The gospel of self-reliance is always bad news because it always leads to more anxiety. But if I can learn to notice it, eventually name its source and triggers, and move past it, I encounter the actual good news of Jesus, the gospel of grace, which always leads to freedom.”²¹⁶

Leaders who hope to join God in re-forming the church must first submit to the Spirit’s work of theosis in their own lives. A bishop or superintendent is a symbol among symbols, an incarnational signpost and exemplar of the church, and must therefore give careful attention not only to what they do, but how they do it.

The DS As a Convener of the Called

In important ways, overseers are pastors of pastors. They do their best to shepherd clergy and promote their overall wellbeing. However, overseers do more than care for pastors; they also gather the community for the sake of furthering the gospel. They have the “authority to convene.” To lead reform, overseers must learn when and how to use this authority in ways that

²¹⁴ Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus*. (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2020), 16.

²¹⁵ Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 105.

²¹⁶ Cuss, 18-19.

generate positive change. In fact, perhaps the loneliness that so often characterizes the episcopacy happens precisely because overseers do not take the opportunity to convene their people often enough. Overseers should not be afraid to share their vision and challenge others to “follow them as they follow Christ.”²¹⁷ In a popular TED Talk, leadership guru Simon Sinek points out that “The first follower is what transforms a lone nut into a leader.”²¹⁸ Theologian and UMC Bishop William Willimon argues that “The greatest myth of leadership is the myth of the lone warrior. The Cabinet preserves me from this fantasy. The bishop-district superintendent system is a wonderfully team-based, consultative, collegial way of working that offers a maximum of interaction with different perspectives. Information can be unearthed and shared, conflict can be orchestrated, and moves can be interpreted collegially.”²¹⁹

However, gathering for the sake of mission is not the only time overseers call their communities together. We can also convene the community for companionship and even love. Rich Villodas observes that, “Jesus, being fully God and fully human, understood the need for a social bonding. Jesus experienced intimacy, connection, and vulnerability throughout his life. He gathered disciples around him, feasted at parties, received love, confessed his weakness, revealed intimate details about himself, and gave and received tender physical touch.”²²⁰ Can ecclesial leaders experience friendship and deep familial relationship with their people? If Jesus could do it, then surely, we can too. Theosis cannot take place apart from a loving community; it is among friends that we become our best selves.

²¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:1.

²¹⁸ Simon Sinek, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.” TED Talk. Retrieved May 17, 2022, from https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

²¹⁹ William H. Willimon, *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 5.

²²⁰ Villodas, 156-157.

What are some ways superintendents can “convene the called” within the life of their districts? A few examples might include:

- Identifying an inner circle of early adopters who support the DS’s vision and are willing to invest in it. The DS should give the best of his or her time and energies to these first followers.
- Take groups of pastors and lay leaders on overnight retreats to deepen relationships, engage in focused prayer and discernment, address key issues facing the community, and develop missional plans.
- Form action teams to pilot new work on the district in the form of small-scale missional experiments (as opposed to larger projects that require significant planning and resources, which may be impractical or unhelpful in contexts requiring adaptive leadership).
- Create theology think tank groups to draft white papers, sermon outlines, and teaching content that articulate the theological values, missional strategy, and desired witness of the community.

The superintendent plays a vital role within their districts as a keeper of the story, prophet to the church, incarnational signpost, and convener of the called. However, the work of revitalizing our witness in the world through the slow and patient work of discipleship must be shouldered by the whole community. We will turn now our attention back to this matter.

Five Kinds of Work that a District Community Does in Pursuit of Renewal

The superintendent is but one member of the district community. How and when might the community come together to do the practical work of renewal? In a rapidly changing and complex culture, there are no “silver bullets” or “one-size-fits-all” solutions. The church must

learn to think and work in ways that are reflective, adaptive, collaborative, and generative. A district community needs to gather to ask questions like:

- What is the true condition of our souls and the quality of our life together? In the spirit of the psalmist, we pray, “Search us, God, and know our hearts; test us and know our anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting.”²²¹
- What is the state of our witness in the world; if it is damaged, how might we repair it? What does it look like for us to “become all things to all people [in our time], so that by all means possible [we] might save some?”²²²

What is being advocated for here is a revival of the Wesleyan practice of frequent, thoughtful, and purposeful Christian conferencing, reimagined for our current context. Aside from the relational benefits that such a commitment offers, coming together to ask big questions and solve complex challenges is essential for change to occur. To that end, a community in pursuit of renewal engages in at least five distinct kinds of work: Discerning, Distilling, Designing, Doing, and Debriefing.

The Work of Discerning: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” said the Lord to the seven churches in Asia.²²³ The life and work of the church is animated, guided, and sustained by the Spirit of God. Therefore, the first task of the community is to prayerfully discern God’s voice and activity in the world. We must seek to “understand the

²²¹ Psalm 139:23-24, NIV.

²²² 1 Corinthians 9:22, NIV.

²²³ Revelation 2:7, NIV.

times.” Dwight Zscheile, Vice President of Innovation and Professor of Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary, writes:

In our work with congregations, we usually hear what Alan Roxburgh calls “church questions.” These are questions like, How can we get more people to join our church? How can our church meet a need in the neighborhood? How can we attract more young families? ... [We] invite ministry leaders to change the questions their communities ask from “church questions” to “God questions.” God questions can’t be answered through strategic plans and managerial solutions. They require a different posture of listening, discernment, experimentation, and reflection in community... “God questions” ask, What might God be up to in the lives of our neighbors? Where has God been present in the history of our congregation? How might the Spirit be moving in the lives of our church’s members or calling us to join God’s work in the neighborhood?²²⁴

Ruth Haley Barton defines discernment as “an ever-increasing capacity to ‘see’ or discern the works of God in the midst of the human situation so that we can align ourselves with whatever it is that God is doing.”²²⁵ Discernment is a form of “deep work,” which Cal Newport, who writes about the intersections of culture and technology, describes as, “activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push [our] cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve [our] skill, and are hard to replicate.”²²⁶ Many pastors, however, are inundated with shallow work – “non-cognitively demanding tasks... which tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.”²²⁷ Without clear indicators of fruitfulness and time to think and reflect, busyness often becomes a proxy for productivity, and the mission drift sets in. Newport argues that “the ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy.

²²⁴ Dwight Zscheile, Michael Binder, Teresa Pinkstaff, *Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), 7-8.

²²⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups*. (Lisle, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012, Kindle Edition), 20.

²²⁶ Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2016, Kindle Edition), 3.

²²⁷ Newport, 6.

As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive.”²²⁸

District communities pursuing renewal must prioritize and make space for the deep work of discernment. Haley Barton’s *Pursuing God’s Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* is an excellent resource in this regard. Some questions to consider include, “What is happening in our congregations and our culture? How do we see evidence of God’s presence and activity in our community? When and how will we come together to engage in deep work?” In light of our faltering witness and continued decline, the church would also do well to engage in some serious soul searching. “Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first!” says the Spirit of God warning the church in Ephesus.²²⁹ How might we have deviated from our identity, values, calling, and/or mission as the people of God? In what ways have we conformed to the pattern of the world and resisted the Holy Spirit’s efforts to give us the mind of Christ?²³⁰

Throughout his tenure as founder and CEO of Microsoft, Bill Gates scheduled biannual “think weeks” to “step outside the day-to-day demands of [his] job and really focus on the big picture.”²³¹ During these times, Gates secluded himself in an undisclosed location, armed with a stack of curated reading materials, to do some of his biggest, most creative thinking. Similarly, districts might encourage pastors to set aside regular “think days” and host periodic “think weeks” for the community to pray, discern, and dream about the future of the church. They may consider becoming a writing community, following the example of groups such as Godspace.²³²

²²⁸ Newport, 14.

²²⁹ Revelation 2:5, NIV.

²³⁰ Romans 12:2.

²³¹ Aled Maclean-Jones, “Think Weeks: What They Are and How to Do Them Right.” ashore.io/journal/future-of-work/think-weeks-bill-gates-what-they-are. Accessed 9 Sept. 2024.

²³² “Writers Community.” Godspacelight, godspacelight.com/community/. Accessed 7 Sept. 2024.

Districts might maintain recommended reading list, create a blog, or host a regular podcast to cultivate a culture of reflection and learning. These are a few of the ways district communities can make space for the deep work of discernment.

The Work of Distilling: We seek to understand the times so that we might know what God’s people should do. The next task of the community is to distill what they have discerned into simple, clear, and actionable language. Patrick Lencioni, founder of The Table Group, argues that healthy organizations must achieve clarity around the following questions: Why do we exist? How do we behave? What will we do? How will we succeed? What is most important right now? Who must do what?²³³ Similarly, church consulting firm Auxano’s vision-framing process consists of four key components: (1) Mission: What are we doing? (2) Values: Why are we doing it? (3) Strategy: How are we doing it? (4) Measures: When are we successful?²³⁴

What is God calling the community to do? How do we communicate and reinforce that message? Complexity can be paralyzing, while simplicity can be liberating. As The Table Group explains, “There’s nothing inspiring about a message you can’t understand, much less commit to memory... We challenge clients to put clarity in simple terms that everyone can understand. And once they’ve said it over and over, people start acting on it and transformation occurs.”²³⁵

The Work of Designing: Once the community understands the times and what God’s people ought to do, the next task is to determine how to do it. This is the work of designing. If God is

²³³ Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2012).

²³⁴ “SUMS Remix Vol. 115: Vision Framing.” Auxano, www2.auxano.com/l/28802/2014-04-11/hwlp. Accessed 2 Sept. 2024.

²³⁵ “Getting Clear about Clarity.” The Table Group, www.tablegroup.com/getting-clear-about-clarity/. Accessed 3 Sept. 2024.

calling us to upend our prevailing ministry model and become a fresh expression of church within an underserved community, is it possible to design and test a suitable “prototype” that would allow us to evaluate its viability while mitigating risk and conserving resources? This practice is a key component of Design Thinking, a creative process taught by Stanford Business School and employed by many of the world’s most innovative companies.

District communities can make space for the work of designing by training pastors and congregations in the principles of Design Thinking, providing matching grants for missional prototypes, exposing their people to fresh expressions of ministry, and highlighting stories of faithful innovation at assemblies and various channels of communication. TryTank Research Institute, an experimental ministry initiative within the Episcopal Church, seeks to “[harness] the power of foresight and innovation to explore the future of the church and its impact on society, [delivering] practical and actionable insights and research that inform how faith communities can adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world.”²³⁶ An extensive list of experimental ministries can be found on their website. Here is a sampling:

- **Latino Ministry in a Box:** Using multi-site technology to create a Spanish-speaking congregation taking small steps.
- **Spin Church:** Taking the basics of a regular "Soul Cycle" group fitness class and making it full-out about Jesus and then sharing a liturgical meal after.
- **Interactive Sunday:** Using technology to have interactive sermons (quizzes, surveys, word clouds, etc.) leading to more engagement with the church and higher attendance.
- **Home Sermons:** Weekly 3-minute sermon videos to be used by Eucharistic ministers as they take communion to the homebound.
- **Mall Church:** To create a pop-up store front church that can minister to workers and shoppers in a mall during a busy season.
- **Metaverse Church:** Creating a prototype digital community that is sacramental and is constantly inviting people to an in-person congregation as well.
- **Digital Godly Play:** Offering Godly Play small groups via Zoom to test the effectiveness of such groups in increasing conversations about God, religion, and spirituality within families.²³⁷

²³⁶ “About Trytank.” TryTank, www.trytank.org/about.html. Accessed 6 Sept. 2024.

²³⁷ “Experiments.” TryTank, www.trytank.org/experiments.html. Accessed 6 Sept. 2024.

The Work of Doing: Those who are tasked with leading the church in an age of disruption and change need to make space for discernment, distilling, and designing. They also need to understand how to “get things done.” Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen notes that “it’s often straightforward to identify a strategy needed to achieve a goal, but what trips up companies is figuring out how to execute the strategy once identified.”²³⁸ Christensen’s 4DX (4 Disciplines of Execution) framework “is based on the fundamental premise that execution is more difficult than strategizing.”²³⁹ Cal Newport summarizes the Four Disciplines of Execution as follows:

- **Discipline 1: Focus on the Wildly Important.** The authors explain that “the more you try to do, the less you actually accomplish... Execution should be aimed at a small number of ‘wildly important goals.’ This simplicity will help focus an organization’s energy to a sufficient intensity to ignite real results.”²⁴⁰
- **Discipline 2: Act on the Lead Measures.** Lag measures describe what you are trying to improve (e.g. number of conversions, baptisms, new members). “The problem with lag measures is that they come too late to change your behavior. When you receive them, the performance that drove them is already in the past.”²⁴¹ Lead measures focus on the new behaviors that drive success on the lag measures.²⁴²
- **Discipline 3: Keep a Compelling Scorecard.** “People play differently when they’re keeping score... When attempting to drive your team’s engagement toward your

²³⁸ Newport, 135.

²³⁹ Newport, 141.

²⁴⁰ Newport, 136.

²⁴¹ Newport, 137.

²⁴² Newport, 136.

organization's wildly important goal, it's important that they have a public place to record and track their lead measures."²⁴³

- **Discipline 4: Create a Cadence of Accountability.** The 4DX authors explain that the most crucial step in execution is to hold people accountable for accomplishing lead measures. They advocate for “a rhythm of regular and frequent meetings [in which] team members must confront their scoreboard, commit to specific actions to help improve the score before the next meeting, and describe what happened with the commitments they made at the last meeting... [This is] where execution really happens.”²⁴⁴

As sales consultant Rick Page says, “Hope is not a strategy.” A district community that desires renewal must move from prayer and planning to execution and accomplishment. We cannot afford to languish for too long in the meeting room; at some point, we must overcome our fears, step out in faith, and “do the thing.”

The Work of Debriefing: The work of innovation and re-formation is not a tidy, linear process. Mistakes will be made. Resources will be expended. Results may vary. It is vital that the community anticipates and embraces failure and adopts an iterative approach to renewal. After an idea is prototyped and implemented, the community needs to gather to ask questions like, “Did we achieve the intended result? What went well? What did not go well? Should we try again? If so, how might we do things differently? What did we learn about God, ourselves, our neighbors, and the nature and work of mission in our context?”

We should also be open to unintended outcomes that yield surprising benefits. The now-famous story of the invention of Post-It Notes comes to mind: scientist Spencer Silver of 3M

²⁴³ Newport, 139.

²⁴⁴ Newport, 140.

Laboratories set out to develop super-strong adhesives in the late 1960s when he “accidentally created a weak adhesive that stuck to surfaces without bonding tightly to them.”²⁴⁵ Though it seemed like Silver had failed, his discovery led to the creation of one of 3M’s most enduring and profitable products. Today, the average working professional receives eleven messages via Post-it per day. What initially seems like failure may, in fact, turn out to be a breakthrough discovery.

When a district community’s efforts to pursue renewal inevitably stall, it is helpful to consider which kind of work it must revisit. Did the community fail to give adequate attention to prayer, thinking, and discernment? Were its conclusions not clearly distilled into simple, actionable language? Were there design flaws in the project? Was the failure due to poor execution? Did the community fail to thoroughly debrief and learn from their experience?

It is important to note that the five kinds of work described here are not necessarily sequential in nature. Rather, they are often happening concurrently and iteratively. For example, a community might be discerning the need for a fresh expression of church in a local prison at the same time it is debriefing the results of a recent church plant. Or, the community may be designing a new leadership development program while it is also doing the work of training pastors in compassionate ministry.

For Wesleyan-Holiness people, the work of renewal is an expression of our desire to marry “holiness of heart and life.” When undertaken with pure intentions, our efforts to become more missionally fruitful and effective become an act of worship, in which we strive to love God and neighbor more perfectly. Thus, there need be no artificial separation between the work of

²⁴⁵ Graham Winfrey, “The Genius Design Elements That Made Post-It Notes a Runaway Success.” www.inc.com/graham-winfrey/the-genius-design-elements-that-made-post-its-a-runaway-success.html. Accessed 8 Sept. 2024.

spiritual formation and missional innovation. Both are valid expressions of worship, potential means of grace, and forms of Christian witness.

The next section contains a preview of the artifact that accompanies this dissertation: a multi-year rhythm of gathering as a district community to engage in the work of renewal, which reflects the insights, values, and practices explored thus far.

Chapter 4: Gathering with Purpose – A Proposal for District Life and Mission

Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How

The values, ideas, and practices set forth in this dissertation have inspired its accompanying artifact: a multi-year rhythm of purposeful gathering within a district community for the sake of collective renewal. It is particularly fitting for believers belonging to the Wesleyan tradition to prioritize this way of being and living as the family of God. John Wesley “listed Christian Conferencing as one of five instituted means of grace (meaning it has a privileged position because it was instituted by Christ in Scripture), alongside Prayer, Searching the Scriptures, the Lord’s Supper, and Fasting.”²⁴⁶ His revolutionary use of small groups provided a context in which people could receive support and grow in faith. More importantly, Wesley’s system of accountability, divided into three formative aspects: societies, classes, and bands, proved highly effective in producing disciples who were both spiritually mature and missionally fruitful.²⁴⁷ While the particular form these gatherings took is of some value, it was their function

²⁴⁶ Kevin M. Watson. “Holy Conferencing: What Did Wesley Mean? (Part 2).” Kevin M. Watson. Last modified October 23, 2014. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://kevinmwatson.com/2013/07/18/holy-conferencing-what-did-wesley-mean-part-2>.

²⁴⁷ Mark Maddix, “John Wesley’s Small Groups: Models of Christian Community.” Good Shepherd United Methodist Church. Last modified December 6, 2019. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://belonggsumc.com/john-wesleys-small-groups-models-of-christian-community/>.

Maddix summarizes the format and function of Wesley’s discipleship strategy as follows:

- *Societies* primarily focused on educational channels through which the tenets of Methodism were presented. These tenets were taught in a large classroom setting primarily through lecture, preaching, public reading, hymn singing, and 'exhorting.'
- *Classes* were intimate gatherings of 10 or 12 people who met weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth [and were] the most influential instructional unit in Methodism. Class meetings get so much credit because they radically transformed England's working masses. The success centered on the instructional design of behavioral change.
- *Bands* facilitated affective redirection. Unlike the class meeting, the band was a homogenous grouping by gender, age, and marital status. Bands were voluntary, intimate cells of 3-5 people who professed a clear Christian faith and who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intention. Members sought to improve their attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions, and affections. A central function of the band was what Wesley termed 'close conversation.' By this term he meant soul-searching examination, not so much of behavior and ideas, but of motive and heartfelt impressions.

which is most relevant to our conversation here. Kevin M. Watson, Professor of Wesleyan Studies at Seattle Pacific University, explains it well: “Christian Conference was *honest, direct, piercing conversation* with other Christians that was intended to help the participants *grow in holiness*” (italics mine).²⁴⁸

Growing in holiness is not only about the cultivation of Christian character, but also our cooperation in Christian mission. Therefore, the kind of Christian conferencing being proposed here has four emphases: (1) cultivation of the interior life, (2) connection with fellow believers, (3) revitalization of the church’s witness, and (4) reframing and renewing our mission.

Consideration must be given to the purpose and design of such gatherings. Why is the community coming together? Who should participate? Where will we gather? How often? To what end? Wesley understood the importance of “right-sizing” each type of gathering according to its purpose and providing a clear structure. He may not have known it at the time, but his instincts would later be validated by the work of 1960’s sociologist Edward T. Hall. Joseph Myers, building upon Hall’s work, describes five kinds of contexts that contribute, substantively but differently, to people’s spiritual development:

- **The Public Context** exists where people gather in the 100s around a shared outside resource. In this environment, the focus is on engaging with the outside resource, rather than building relational depth with others who are present.
- **The Social Context** is the range between 20 and 70 people, where we seek to build affinity with others. In this context, three things happen: we build relationships, identify with whom we would like to become closer friends, and reveal elements of our identity and our journey.
- **The Personal Context** forms in groups of 3 to 12, where we are comfortable sharing more private information. Think, for instance, of good friends talking over a meal, revealing personal thoughts and feelings about their ongoing lives and relationships. In this environment of acceptance and physical closeness, we are able to experience a genuine depth of friendship.
- **The Transparent Context** is when you are with just 1 or 2 others, your closest of relationships. Characterized by complete openness and candor, nothing is held back in this context, echoing the biblical ideal of being “naked and yet unashamed.”

²⁴⁸ Watson, “Holy Conferencing.”

- **The Divine Context** represents God’s direct interactions with us at a one-on-one level. Our focus shifts from relationships with others to being alone with our Creator and Redeemer, as He encounters us in our inner world. This in turn resources us to engage more fruitfully in each of the other four Contexts.²⁴⁹

CONTEXT	SIZE	FOCUS	DISTANCE
Public	100s	Outside resources	12’ +
Social	20 – 70	Sharing snapshots that build affinity	4’ - 12’
Personal	3 - 12	Revealing private information	18” - 4’
Transparent	1 or 2	Living in complete openness	0 – 18”
Divine	Alone with God	Being with your Creator and Redeemer	Inner World

Each of these contexts has an appropriate and necessary expression in the life of the church. District communities should therefore leverage the strengths of all five contexts in its efforts to catalyze renewal. This is especially true given that many congregations are small and do not experience the benefits of large gatherings. In fact, it is counterproductive for a church of thirty people to behave as if it is operating in the public context, in which the emphasis is on engaging with an outside resource (e.g. the worship leader or preacher) rather than one another. Neither is it reasonable to expect people to cultivate deep friendships or accomplish substantive work at large district gatherings. Each context has its place and purpose and is reflected in the rhythm of Christian conferencing described in the accompanying artifact. Pastors and leaders will gather in groups of threes and fours, in gatherings of 5-15, in larger groups of 20-75, and crowds of seventy-five or more as appropriate to the task at hand.

Some notable features of this proposed rhythm of Christian conferencing include:

- **The Community Gathers for the Sake of Becoming, Discerning, and Doing.** It is common for districts to gather to report on the activity of the local church and receive

²⁴⁹ “Disciple Making Dimension Prep Course.” Exponential. Last modified August 23, 2024. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://exponential.org/lessons/disciple-making-spaces-the-five-contexts-of-discipleship>.

training on how to do the work of ministry and mission. Crudely speaking, the focus is often on “producing more widgets,” i.e., increasing conversions, baptisms, new members, and attendance. If the community aspires to present a credible witness in the world, however, it must also gather to cultivate its interior life with God and thoughtfully consider what it means to be a holy people in our modern context. Who we are is just as important as what we do, if not more so. At the same time, the community must give significant attention to reimagining and retooling itself for effective mission in a time of cultural and ecclesial upheaval.

- **The Rhythm of Life for the District Community is Predictable and Purposeful.**

Contrary to the popular axiom, when it comes to the life of the church, absence does not make the heart grow fonder. Rather, the adage, “out of sight, out of mind,” is a more accurate description of what happens to the relational and missional cohesion of a district community when its members do not gather with sufficient regularity or purpose. To that end, the proposed communal rhythm incorporates weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual gatherings to engage in the five types of work described previously (discerning, distilling, designing, doing, and debriefing).

- **The Superintendent is a Full Participant in the Community.** As a member of (not over) the district, the superintendent is a keeper of the story, prophet to the church, exemplar of the faith, and convener of the called. He or she embodies the character, posture, and behavior to which the community aspires. The superintendent is an important (but by no means only) facilitator of learning, connection, and collaboration, as well as a co-participant in the community’s journey of discovery and

growth. He or she is among the chief “listeners” in the community who reflects back to its members, “This is what we hear the Lord saying to the churches.”

- **The Process is Scalable.** Many of the principles and practices expressed in this artifact may be applied at the local, district, regional, and even global levels of the church. Of course, some elements may be more difficult to implement in the smallest or largest contexts. However, the value of intentional, thoughtful, and regular Christian conferencing to address our biggest opportunities and challenges cannot be understated, and ought to be revived by the church and its various institutions.
- **Progress Will be Slow.** As noted earlier, the reasons for the decline of the church and her weakened witness are numerous and complex. No amount of Christian conferencing will be sufficient to foster complete unity within a community or address all of its problems. Gathering people consistently is notoriously difficult for middle judicatories, which are diverse, dispersed, and ever-changing. Progress will be slow. While Christian conferencing is not a panacea, over time, well-designed gatherings can sow health into the life of the church as new paradigms and practices are introduced through “honest, direct, piercing conversations.”

Overview of Artifact Design and Content

The intended audience for the artifact accompanying this dissertation includes those who oversee the life and ministry of districts in the Church of the Nazarene, such as district superintendents, district advisory boards, auxiliary committees, and zone leaders, as well as the broader communities that they serve. The artifact will include an overview of the researcher’s proposal that districts should be understood as (1) a covenant community of faith, a family on

mission in the world, and a blended ecology of both inherited and fresh expressions of the local church. Other orienting material will include commentary on the nature of spiritual formation and missional innovation, the role of the superintendent within the district community, and notable features of communities pursuing renewal in our modern context.

As an internal resource for district communities, there are no established standards of publication for the artifact. A combination of written content, diagrams and illustrations, and curated materials will provide enough direction for leaders to implement a similar rhythm of Christian conferencing, adapted for their context. For illustration purposes, the artifact will be written with the Northern California District Church of the Nazarene in mind.

Building upon John Wesley’s class system and Joseph Myers’ work on social contexts, the proposed conferencing rhythm for a district community is as follows:

Context	Monthly	Seasonally (3-4 times/yr.)	Annually
Public (75+)	Virtual Town Hall with DS*		District Assembly L.E.A.D. Days Pastors Retreat
Social (20-75)		Crucial Conversations	
Personal (5-15)	Zone Gatherings		Zone Retreats*
Transparent (3-4)	Band Meetings		

** These gatherings will not be covered in the artifact, but represent additional opportunities for the community to practice Christian conferencing as envisioned in this proposal.*

- Public Context (75 people or more):** In the Church of the Nazarene, districts gather annually for the “district assembly” to elect officers, receive reports, ordain ministers, and conduct other church business. This meeting is also an opportunity for district leadership to cast vision, shape culture, and resource the church. Annual gatherings of a district community also typically include pastors retreats and ministerial candidate development

and assessment events. The artifact will propose agendas for these gatherings that orient the community toward the work of renewal.

- **Social Context (20-75 people):** Mid-size gatherings designed around relationship building and the work of revitalization are often an underutilized practice in the life of districts. If a district hopes to fully harness the combined knowledge, talents, and resources toward its collective renewal, however, such meetings become essential. The proposed conferencing rhythm includes “Crucial Conversation Days” in which the community gathers three to four times per year to discuss critical issues facing the church, particularly around repairing its witness and reimagining its mission in the world.
- **Personal Context (5-15 people):** John Wesley’s class meetings focused on behavioral change and were the most influential instructional unit in Methodism.²⁵⁰ Groups of 5-15 people are ideal for connection and collaboration. In the proposed conferencing rhythm, monthly gatherings of pastors serving within a 30-mile radius serve this purpose. In the researcher’s experience, such zone meetings can devolve into superficial conversation or gripe sessions that do little to advance the mission of the church. Again, suggested meeting agendas will be provided to facilitate more substantive renewal work.
- **Transparent Context (3-4 people):** Wesley’s bands provided a space where one’s attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions, and affections might be examined with trusted friends. If a district community hopes to form mature disciples who bear a credible gospel witness, it will prioritize the character formation of its clergy. The Church of the Nazarene affirms that the success and integrity of its mission “depends largely upon the

²⁵⁰ Maddix, “John Wesley's Small Groups.”

spiritual qualifications, character, and manner of life of its ministers.”²⁵¹ The conferencing rhythm will include a monthly opportunity for pastors to receive group spiritual direction and practice mutual accountability.

This approach to district life has many advantages. It provides a predictable and purposeful rhythm in which the community may engage in the work of renewal. Multiple forms of engagement in various groupings and environments are utilized in order to leverage the strengths of each social context. Shared values, culture, goals, and solutions are discerned, clarified, and reinforced throughout the year. Convening the community in this manner also mitigates the isolation and stagnation that smaller congregations often experience. Finally, such an approach to district life and ministry enables overwhelmed superintendents to steadily move their vast constituencies toward meaningful change.

²⁵¹ *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene*, 199.

Chapter 5: Binding the Body Together in Love and Purpose

The genesis of this dissertation has been the researcher's frustration with the limitations of the superintendency in regard to facilitating renewal within his own community.

Denominational overseers are often mired in administrative tasks and crisis management that do little to help the church flourish in an era of rapid change and growing secularism. Districts are highly complex, diverse, and dispersed communities that are more prone to entropy than to evolution. Many pastors and congregations do not view the superintendent as someone who is able to offer much in the way of relevant expertise or tangible support regarding ministry in their particular context. Literature on the nature of middle judicatory leadership is sparse and training often focuses on technical skills over adaptive thinking. The reasons behind the accelerating decline of the American church are numerous and complex; no amount of retooling could possibly prepare one to understand, let alone solve, every one of these challenges. Against such a backdrop, one might forgive ecclesial overseers for feeling as if they have been set up to fail.

Superintendents are not powerless to make a difference, however. As Robert Schnase points out, they have the authority to convene the community, to select leadership, to set the agenda, to clarify priorities, and to create common language around mission. Existing rhythms of district life can be leveraged and modified to cultivate renewal. The historical and global church is a rich repository of knowledge and practices in regard to spiritual formation and resilient mission. We have learned much about the process of innovation, and many are experimenting with new ways of doing gospel work. As inherited forms of church wane in size, number, and influence, fresh expressions of Christian community are taking root alongside them.

Denominational overseers are able to gather their people around such crucial conversations and

set the stage for new missional life. Most importantly, those charged with the care of districts can call the community to humble prayer, joyful obedience, and courageous faith in the living God, whose Spirit animates and empowers us for a life of holy love.

The artifact accompanying this dissertation was created with the tools available to superintendents and the natural patterns of district life in mind. A rhythm of purposeful Christian conferencing is a realistic and appropriate approach to the work of renewal in middle judicatories. For this to be effective, however, the role of the superintendent needs to be recast, the values of the community need to be clarified, and the expectations of its members need to be raised. It is the researcher's hope that the ideas and practices presented in this dissertation will be helpful to districts that yearn for a new day and are willing to rise to the challenge together.

Implementation in Context

As a current superintendent in the Northern California District Church of the Nazarene, the researcher intends to implement this artifact in his own community. Some of these rhythms have already been put into practice and are in various stages of development. Much of the material in the artifact, however, has not yet been introduced to the researcher's community.

A significant challenge in implementing the artifact is the matter of soliciting buy-in from the community. One denominational leader quipped that serving in the superintendency is akin to being director of a cemetery: he or she watches over many people, but nobody is listening. Humor aside, most pastors and congregations are unaccustomed to the level of engagement, both with district leadership and each other, that this proposal entails. Accordingly, the benchmark for success ought not to be complete adoption, but rather sufficient momentum. Author and social researcher Malcolm Gladwell speaks of "The Tipping Point," which is "that magic moment when

an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.”²⁵²

According to Chris Maloney, who writes on the diffusion of change, this tipping point is reached when around sixteen percent of a target population takes up an innovation.²⁵³ A modest yet achievable goal, then, would be for sixteen percent of the researcher’s community to commit to a regular rhythm of Christian conferencing for the sake of collective renewal.

Implementing the artifact in the researcher’s context is also complicated by the multiple language groups and subcultures represented in the community. Nevertheless, efforts to foster inclusion and participation across the district have so far been well received. Leaders do their best to accommodate differing cultural norms, materials are translated into participants’ native language, live interpretation is provided whenever possible, and a diversity of voices is encouraged across age, gender, and culture.

Though the practice of Christian conferencing may require significant adaptation in the researcher’s particular context, the contours of the approach described in the artifact remain the same: (1) convene the community regularly, (2) utilize different groups and environments to engage in the patient work of revitalization, and (3) cycle through the stages of discerning, distilling, designing, doing, and debriefing in pursuit of renewal.

Suggestions for Future Practice of Study

The complex nature of renewal necessitates a multidisciplinary approach to any efforts to facilitate change. For the purposes of this discussion, the researcher has chosen to draw insights

²⁵² “The Tipping Point Book Summary.” You Exec. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://youexec.com/book-summaries/the-tipping-point-by-malcolm-gladwell>.

²⁵³ “The Secret to Accelerating Diffusion of Innovation: The 16% Rule Explained.” INNOVATE OR DIE. Last modified October 11, 2023. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://innovateordie.com.au/2010/05/10/the-secret-to-accelerating-diffusion-of-innovation-the-16-rule-explained>.

from the spiritual formation practices of the early church, modern innovation theory, and new monasticism. Future areas of study of interest to the researcher include a more in-depth exploration of adaptive leadership and change management, especially as it might be applied to ecclesial renewal within immigrant communities in the West. A study of revival movements would likely yield further insights that would be beneficial to this conversation. The researcher would also like to visit various new monastic communities for a first-hand look at how they experience life and engage in mission together.

Those hoping to build on the researcher's work might consider the following:

- **Develop Content to Address Additional Adaptive Challenges.** The researcher has chosen to create questions, exercises, and content for his district around two themes: spiritual formation and missional innovation. There is no shortage, however, of adaptive challenges that a community might explore, such as reducing pastoral burnout and attrition, mitigating the rising costs of ministry, responding to demographic shifts in the church and culture, confronting the rise of religious nationalism, and revisiting what Christian witness in the public sphere looks like in a secular age. Those wishing to build on the researcher's work might apply the approach to Christian conferencing proposed in this study to issues relevant to their context, creating new sets of questions and challenges for their people to process.
- **Tinker With the Format and Frequency of Meetings.** The artifact offered here is itself an example of missional innovation. The researcher has done some work in regard to discerning, distilling, and designing a rhythm of Christian conferencing for his community. However, the model has not yet been tested; the doing and debriefing phases have yet to be implemented. Since innovation is iterative in nature, the

community will need to periodically refine the format and frequency of its gatherings in pursuit of better results. Those building on the researcher's work would be free to similarly tinker with the process to suit their own context and constraints.

- **Experiment with Asynchronous and Digital Means of Conferencing.** The researcher has premised his work on the assumption that in-person, real-time gatherings are most conducive to complex work of renewal. However, advances in technology will continue to create new and effective ways of conversing and collaborating across time and distance. Most videoconferencing software now includes tools for providing simultaneous subtitling in different languages and will soon offer AI-powered audio interpretation. How might this benefit districts that include multiple language groups? Virtual and augmented reality headwear is still somewhat of a novelty, but a day will soon come when meeting in VR spaces becomes more commonplace. It seems prudent to explore to what extent asynchronous and digital forms of conferencing can support revitalization work, especially in dispersed communities such as districts.

Limitations of the Study

There are some notable limitations to this study. Chief among them is the lack of data, both quantitative and qualitative, obtained by the researcher regarding how his peers are currently approaching the work of revitalization in their own communities. It is possible that good work is being done in this area. However, the researcher's own conversations with hundreds of frustrated Nazarene clergy and laity, framed against the background of ongoing

decline in the U.S. church, suggest that innovation, rather than imitation, is a more appropriate strategy for renewal.

Another limitation of the study is that little attention was given to the internal systems within the denomination that may be inhibiting renewal. Does our system of governance lend itself to ecclesial reform, stasis, or worse, decay? Is the denomination measuring what matters? Are our institutions still fit for purpose in our current context vis-à-vis preparing leaders for effective mission and supporting the work of the global church? Do superintendents have too much power, or too little?

A third limitation of the study is its theoretical nature. The researcher is not aware of any district communities that practice Christian conferencing in the manner described here, especially in pursuit of spiritual formation and missional innovation. The artifact has not yet been fully tested or refined in the researcher's own context. Thus, at the time of writing, this proposal remains aspirational and unproven.

Lastly, the study does not take into consideration the transient nature of district and local church leadership. Renewal takes time. A district community will need to gather regularly over the span of many months or years in order to make any real progress. Within that time, key members of the community will come and go, including the superintendent, whose successor may not support the community's patient, collaborative, and generative approach to revitalization. It is not clear how frequent changes in the makeup of a district community might impact its ability to reimagine its life and witness together.

Additional Contexts that Might Benefit from the Artifact

The principles and strategies described in the accompanying artifact may be applied to other Christian communities experiencing stagnation or decline. These may include educational institutions, local congregations, parachurch organizations, and larger regional bodies within a denomination. Gathering people to engage in crucial conversations and do the work of designing, testing, and refining new ideas is an indispensable practice for any organization hoping to navigate an era of rapid change. Faith-based communities, however, differ from their secular counterparts in that their work is discerned and accomplished in partnership with God. Therefore, there is a need for a distinctly Christian approach to the work of renewal, which the researcher has endeavored to present here.

Reconnecting the Body

For the body of Christ to work together, we must learn to walk together. We thrive as one body, or not at all. Districts that hope to experience renewal cannot afford to operate as a loose federation of independent congregations; rather, they must be one another's keepers and attend to one another's flourishing. Though the etymology of the word "religion" is disputed, the early Christian writer Lactantius (c.250-c.325) believed the term was derived from the Latin *religiare*, a verb meaning "to fasten or bind." "We are," he said in his book *Divinae Institutiones*, "tied to God and bound to him [*religiati*] by the bond of piety."²⁵⁴ Just as loving our neighbor is akin to loving God, so too (re)binding ourselves to each other is an expression of our unity to Christ and in Christ. The body of Christ must be reconnected not only within the local congregation, but also across districts and denominations, and with the church universal. According to our Lord,

²⁵⁴ "Roots of 'Religion.'" The Forward. Last modified May 25, 2007. Accessed December 18, 2024. <https://forward.com/news/10776/roots-of-religion>.

the church must be one for her witness to be credible.²⁵⁵ Intentional and regular Christian conferencing is one way of restoring the connective tissue that binds the body of Christ together in love and purpose. It is, as Wesley believed, a means of grace.

²⁵⁵ John 17:20-23

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Northern California District
Church of the Nazarene



DEEP WORK

How District Communities Can Work
Together to Renew Their Witness & Mission



Rev. Albert Hung
District Superintendent

A Dissertation Artifact Developed in
Support of the Doctorate of Ministry
in Ecclesial Leadership and Mission



Introduction

God loves the church and has big dreams for her. Jesus said to His disciples that He would build His church, and that even the gates of hell would not be able to withstand it (Matthew 16:18). It is through the church that God intends to make Himself and His will known (Ephesians 3:10). The Apostle Peter reminds the church that they are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). The Apostle Paul affirms that Christ loves the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, and will one day “present her present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25,27). God loves the church and has big dreams for her. At her best, the church is the greatest force for good in the world.

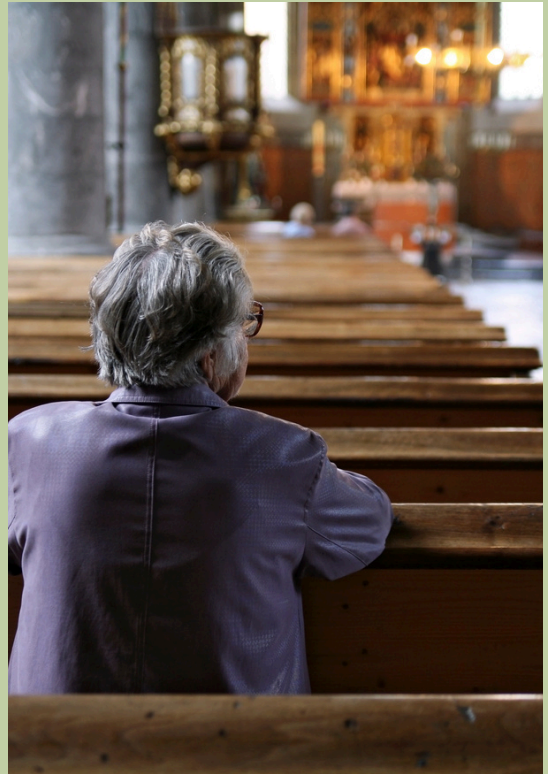
I created this resource for those who love the church and desire to see her become her best self, for the glory of God and the sake of the world. It was shaped by my observations, study, reflections, and prayers as a district superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene. I wrote it for my fellow pastors who have been called by God to lead and care for the church, and for the faithful laypeople in their congregations who labor and sacrifice alongside them. We rejoice when the church is full of life and beauty and grieve when she is bruised and struggling. Some of us may be frustrated with, or even wounded by, the church. But if we are disappointed, it is because we also love the church and have great hopes for her.

These are challenging days for the American church. In the pages that follow, I would like to offer a way of being God’s people together in an increasingly secular and skeptical age. I invite you to join me in asking questions like, “What is the state of the church today, and how did we get here? How might we repair our witness and renew our mission in a rapidly changing world? What values, principles, patterns of life, and ways of thinking might facilitate our collective renewal? How might we become a family on mission together?” As the Lausanne Covenant affirms, “evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.” For the church to flourish and for our mission to succeed, we need you. We need your perspectives, experiences, ideas, talents, resources, and time. God loves the church, and has big dreams for her. And so should we. Let’s begin.

- Albert Hung

The US Church is in Serious Decline

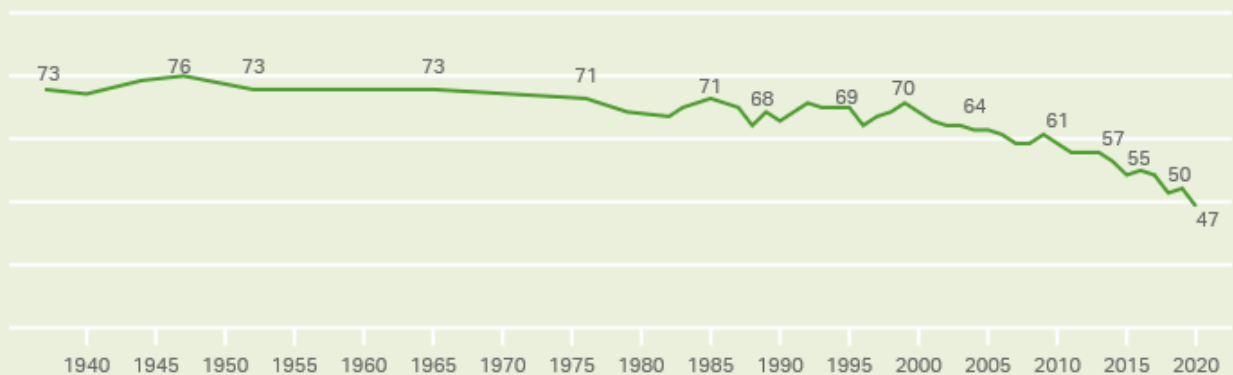
Christianity in the West has been in slow decline for decades, but we are rapidly approaching a tipping point. In the last 20 years, average congregational worship attendance has been cut in half. Church membership has fallen below 50% for the first time in 80 years. The percentage of adults claiming no religious affiliation is rising steadily. Congregations are getting smaller and older as young people exit the church. For every two new churches that are planted, three more close their doors. In these challenging days, how can we work together to bring about renewal?



Church Membership Among U.S. Adults Now Below 50%

Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue or mosque?

— % Yes, member



Based on annual aggregated data, usually based on two surveys
GALLUP





36%

Decline in Nazarene worship attendance in the USA/Canada Region since 2008



38

Median Nazarene worship attendance, down from 60 people in 2008



28%

Adults who claim no religious affiliation



49%

Millennials who identify as Christian, compared to 84% of the silent generation



60

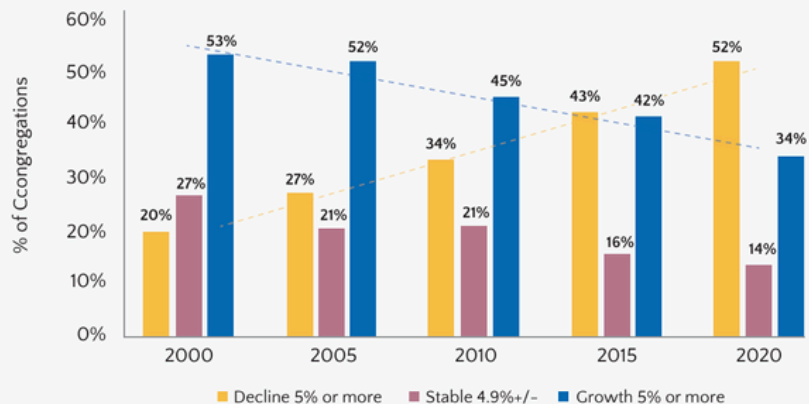
Average age of U.S. senior pastors



10%

Percentage of Nazarene clergy under 40 yrs. old (vs. 20% in 2000)

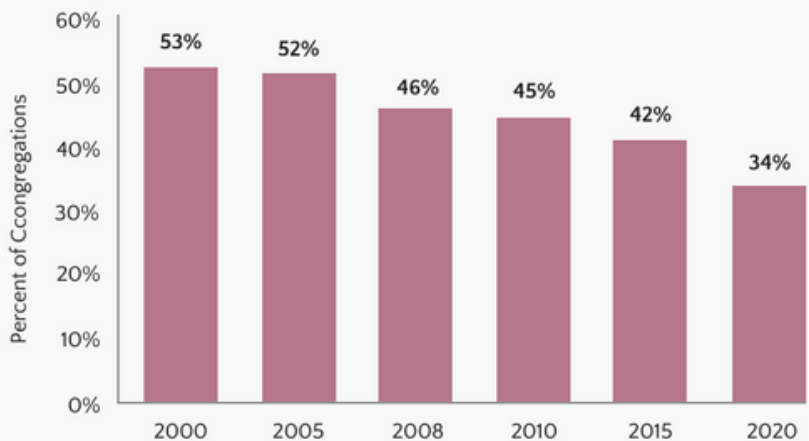
A Consistent Story of Worsening Attendance over Time



Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Figure 10

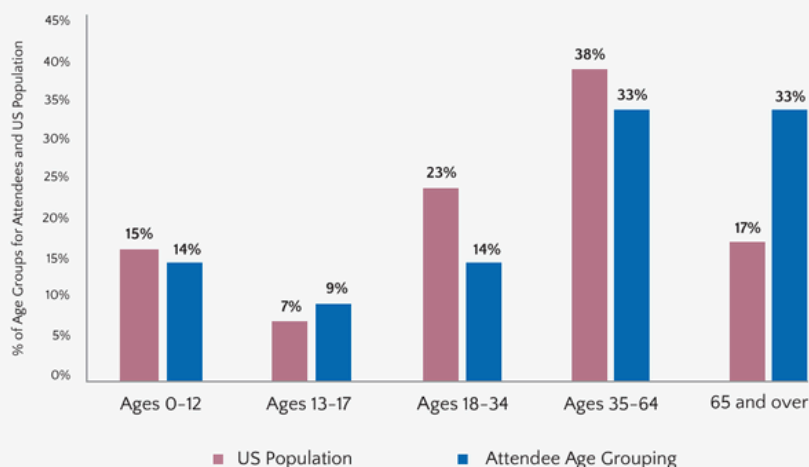
Fewer Congregations Are Growing
Growth 5% or more in past 5 years



Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Figure 8

The Ages of Congregational Participants Doesn't Parallel the US Population



Comparison numbers are based on the Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey.

Source: 2020 Faith Communities Today survey, Hartford Institute for Religion Research

Figure 14



Changing Times Require New Ways of Thinking and Working

The reasons behind the decline of the U.S. church are numerous and complex. For one thing, there is a large perceived gap between the beliefs and values of conservative evangelicals and their neighbors. Across a wide range of issues, there is a growing disparity between what young people care about and what they believe their faith communities care about, including LGBTQA+ rights, gender equity, racial justice, immigration rights, income inequality, creation care, and reproductive rights. Sadly, the reputation of Christians has been greatly damaged by scandals and the church's entanglement in political and cultural issues.

Congregations continue to get older and smaller at the same time we are experiencing a shortage of clergy, falling revenues, aging buildings, and rising costs. As communities change over time, many churches struggle to overcome cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic barriers. New technology is reshaping how we think, interact, work, and play. Major crises such as wars, pandemics, and recessions regularly upend life in our hyper-connected world. It is a new day for the church, and new paradigms and capacities will be needed if we are to thrive. Put another way, "What got us here won't get us there."

"Today's leaders are facing complex challenges that have no clear-cut solutions. These challenges are more systemic in nature and require broad, widespread learning. They can't be solved through a conference, a video series or a program. They are **adaptive challenges**. Adaptive challenges go beyond the technical solutions of resident experts or best practices, or even the organization's current knowledge. They arise when the world around us has changed but we continue to live on the successes of the past. Adaptive challenges can't be solved through compromise or win-win scenarios, or by adding another ministry or staff person to the team. They demand that we make hard choices about what to preserve and to let go. They require us to learn and to change, and to experience and navigate profound loss."

*Tod Bolsinger, Canoeing the Mountains:
Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory.*

Is God Doing a New Thing?

There is a growing sense among church leaders that we are experiencing a significant cultural shift within Western Christianity. Anglican Bishop Mark Dyer theorized that “about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur.” Phyllis Tickle, founding editor of the religion department of Publishers Weekly, observed that whenever this “five-hundred-year rummage sale” takes place, three things tend to happen:



A new form of Christianity emerges that is alive and fruitful

The previously dominant form of Christianity is reconstituted into a more pure and less ossified version of itself

A fresh outpouring of evangelistic power takes place in both the emerging form of church and the cleansed, established form





THE DISTRICT COMMUNITY

The Church of the Nazarene is organized into districts “made up of interdependent local churches organized to facilitate the mission of each local church through mutual support, the sharing of resources, and collaboration” (Manual 200). Our denomination “is not a loose affiliation of independent churches, nor are we merely an association of churches having some commonality of belief and purpose but no real organic relationship. Our church is unapologetically connectional” (Nazarene Essentials). If we are to flourish together, we need to revive this collaborative spirit.

Repairing Our WITNESS

We live in an increasingly secular and skeptical culture, in which Christians are often viewed as judgmental, hypocritical, narrow minded, nationalistic, or - sadly-unloving. How do we repair our broken witness and present a credible, compelling witness to the good news of God? The slow and patient work of forming mature, Christlike disciples is more important than ever. What can we learn from the historical and global church in this regard? How do we rebuild trust with our neighbors?

Renewing Our MISSION

In a changing world, we must think of new ways of being the church. How can we make our faith more visible and our churches more accessible? We need new points of connection, spaces for community, and means of witness. In a noisy and distracted world, how do we “let our light shine before others, that they may see our good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven?” What alternate entryways might we create into the community of faith? How might we reimagine our mission?



ONE BODY, MANY PARTS

How we think about the nature and purpose of districts matters greatly. We are connected to each other spiritually, theologically, relationally, and missionally. Therefore, we view our district community through three important lenses: (1) We are a covenant community of faith, (2) We are a family on mission in the world, and (3) We are a diverse ecosystem of expressions of the local church.

A Covenant Community

Members of a district community share certain rights and responsibilities. They can and should expect kindness, warmth, friendship, encouragement, generosity, and accountability from one another. They can expect active participation in district life, mutual aid in times of need, support for the work of the wider church, and godly submission to the community's elected leaders and one another in love.

A Family on Mission

Mission is the purpose that binds our community together. However, we are not a collection of individuals on mission, but rather a family on mission. The church is called to engage in mission together, with every member awakened, developed, and mobilized toward full participation in God's redemptive work in the world.

A Diverse Ecosystem

We need all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. Healthy districts include, celebrate, and empower multiple expressions of ministry and mission. Inherited forms of church work in symbiotic relationship with fresh expressions. Legacy congregations make room for, and even give away their resources to, churches serving the poor, marginalized, or immigrant populations.

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

-1 Peter 2:9 -



District Leaders

District leaders help to orient the wider community toward greater faithfulness to Jesus Christ and fruitfulness in mission. In addition to supporting local pastors and congregations, they fulfill four important roles: they are (1) stewards of the gospel, (2) prophets to the church, (3) exemplars of the faith, and (4) conveners of the community.



Local Pastors

The health and mission of the Church of the Nazarene “depends largely upon the spiritual qualifications, character, and manner of life of its ministers” (Manual 502.1). Local pastors preach and teach God’s word, nurture people toward spiritual maturity, provide vital care for their congregants and communities, equip God’s people for a life of service and love.



Congregations

Local congregations are the most essential missional unit of the church. Through the work and witness of ordinary Christians, the gospel is made known, hope is found, lives are changed, communities are transformed, and the love of God is seen, felt, and shared. We believe in our local churches and are committed to helping them flourish.





Prevailing Models

In the U.S., the current prevailing model of church is centered around a Sunday worship gathering, led by a member of the clergy, in a brick-and-mortar building. Although there are some variations in the liturgy, most churches follow a familiar pattern of worship and offer similar programming. This remains a vital expression of the church in our context.



Fresh Expressions

Many of our neighbors are not being reached by traditional means of outreach and evangelism. To foster renewal, we need to nurture new forms of worship, connection, and mission. This may entail utilizing alternate spaces, leveraging new technology, and creating decentralized networks of simple churches led by ordinary believers.



Community Partners

God is at work in our cities as well as in our churches. A thriving missional ecosystem requires collaborative relationships with local businesses, non-profits, institutions, and “people of peace” to promote human flourishing. Nazarenes should cultivate such connections to multiply our impact and bring heaven on earth in our communities.

10 Key Values and Practices of Communities Seeking Renewal

1

A Holistic Gospel. We seek to preach and embody a gospel that includes the salvation and sanctification of individuals as well as the transformation of culture and society.

2

A Call to Mission. We embrace our “sent-ness” as followers of Jesus. Every member of the body is invited, developed, empowered, and mobilized to participate in God’s mission.

3

A Culture of Mutuality. We share our resources, knowledge, and people with each other. All in the body are given dignity and honor, especially the vulnerable or marginalized.

4

Diversity and Belonging. We actively promote diversity and belonging at every level, seeking to ensure that everyone can fully participate in the life and mission of the church.

5

Radical Generosity. Like a family circle of Coastal Redwood trees (uniquely native to Northern California), “old growth” congregations generously help to nurture “new growth” congregations.

10 Key Values and Practices of Communities Seeking Renewal

A Discerning Community. We practice mutual discernment in our desire to obey God. We pay attention to the presence of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the needs of a suffering world.

6

Storytelling. We tell both the “big story” of Scripture and the “little stories” of God’s activity in our own lives. Storytelling glorifies God, binds us together, and strengthens our witness.

7

Regular and Purposeful Gathering. We make time to pray, worship, fellowship, serve, and cooperate in mission together. We have adopted a “rule of life” - a rhythm of shared life and purposeful work.

9

A Commitment to Deep Spiritual Formation. We prioritize the spiritual growth of our people. We gather often to ask, “What does it mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus in our time and context?”

9

A Spirit of Missional Innovation. We embrace risk and experimentation in pursuit of our common mission. We make space for people to engage in creative work and do not penalize them for failure.

10

The Work of Spiritual Formation



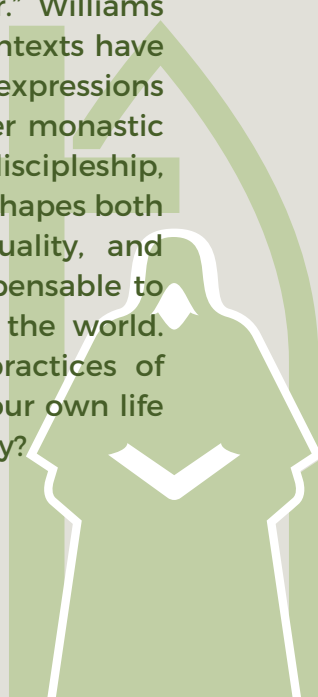
Jesus did not commission His followers to make converts of people. He commanded them to make disciples. The most central task of the church, therefore, is to engage in the work of spiritual formation. As the saying goes, however, “results may vary.” There is a lack of clear consensus among Christians regarding what it means to be a disciple, let alone how to make one. Yet for the first 300 years of the church’s history, believers underwent a relatively consistent and rigorous process of spiritual training that produced in them a genuine, mature, and resilient faith. As a result, the church grew from just a handful of adherents at

the time of Jesus’ ascension to almost 6 million believers by 313 AD. Regarding the improbable rise of Christianity, Mennonite historian Alan Kreider asks, “Why did this minor mystery religion from the eastern Mediterranean - marginal, despised, and discriminated against - grow substantially, eventually supplanting the well-endowed, respectable cults that were supported by the empire and aristocracy? What enabled Christianity to be so successful that by the fifth century it was the established religion of the Roman empire?” Aside from the Christians’ compelling message, religious zeal, and displays of spiritual power, the early church worked to transform people’s **habitus** - the way they thought, behaved, and lived - through two means: catechesis, which re-habituated a person’s behavior through teaching and apprenticeship; and worship, which reinforced the new habitus of the community.

Learning from Monasticism

The church has fallen on hard times before. The people of God have frequently experienced seasons of disruption, change, hardship, corruption, compromise, and persecution. Yet in every generation, God has raised up a faithful community of believers who embody a way of life that is attractive and compelling to outsiders. Monastic communities have often fulfilled this role. Such movements are a rich resource for faith formation, offering tools such as Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius and the Rule of Benedict. The great religious orders have been responsible for many important cultural innovations that have benefited humanity. We can learn much from them.

Stuart Murray Williams, an urban church planter in London, posits that “about every 500 years the Church has relied on some form of monasticism to help it adapt from one cultural epoch to another.” Williams and others in post-Christian contexts have been experimenting with new expressions of church that, like these earlier monastic communities, prioritize deep discipleship, adopt a shared rule of life that shapes both private and communal spirituality, and emphasize “sent-ness” as indispensable to their identity and purpose in the world. How might the values and practices of monastic communities shape our own life together as a district community?



Developing our *Habitus*

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains that **habitus** refers to the “knowledge that we carry in our bodies.” Our habitus is formed by the example of our parents, peers, and role models, by the narratives of our family, community, and culture, and most of all, through repetition - the sheer physicality of doing things over and over until they become habitual and reflexive.

The **habitus** of the early church was integral to their witness. What outsiders saw was not how Christians worshipped, but rather how they lived. According to Tertullian of Carthage, an early church father, outsiders saw Christians feeding poor people and burying them, caring for

boys and girls who lacked property and parents, and being attentive to aged slaves and prisoners. They interpreted these acts as a “work of love.” And they said, “Vide, look! How they love one another.” They did not say, “Aude, listen to the Christians’ message”; they did not say, “Lege, read what they write.”

What does our **habitus** communicate to our neighbors today? If the credibility of our witness is to be restored, we must give careful and sustained attention to how we live out our faith with our bodies (not just our minds or our mouths), with real people, in the real world. How do we train ourselves to live in the manner of Christ?

Adopting a *Regula*

John Mark Comer observes that from the moment we awake each day, we are being continually formed by “a complex web of ideas, cultural narratives, habits, recurring thoughts, rhythms, relationships, spending patterns, activities, environments, family ties, and much more. There are forces - within and without - with a vested interest in us not becoming like Jesus. Therefore: All Christian formation is counter-formation.” James K.A. Smith explains that “We can’t think our way to holiness.” Rather, we live our way to holiness by purposefully participating with God in our own renewal. As Mildred Bangs Wynkoop put it, we must seek to “link the hands of doctrine and life,

to close the gap between thought and act.” David Brooks defines commitment as “falling in love with something and then building a structure of behavior around it for those moments when love falters.” Some communities have revived the practice of committing to a **regula**, a common rule of life. A rule of life, a core feature of Benedictine spirituality, is a shared set of virtues, commitments, and rhythms that help orient a community around what matters most: God. While independence is a value of our culture, it is not a gospel value. Therefore, we call our people to adopt a **regula** for the purpose of strengthening our faith and our witness.

The Work of Missional Innovation



In an increasingly post-Christian culture, the challenge before us is not simply to make our worship more attractive, but also to make our faith more visible and our community more accessible. While the church of Jesus Christ will never die, the church as we know it is dying. Therefore, in addition to developing our **habitus**, we must also reimagine our work. The Sunday worship service no longer functions as the “front door” to the church. We need new points of connection, avenues for mission, and spaces for community. In a noisy and distracted world, how can we “let our light shine before others, that they may see our

good deeds and glorify our Father in heaven?” What alternate entryways might we create into the community of faith? Alongside a commitment to deep spiritual formation, we also need to foster a culture of missional innovation. Communications and creativity expert Len Wilson believes that innovation, properly understood, is essential to the witness and work of the church. He explains, “Christian innovation is what happens when, in faith, we participate in God’s ongoing work in the world. Thus, our goal is to seek after Christ, to incarnate Christ. The work of Christian innovation isn’t just a matter of making something better. It is to give flesh and blood to Christ in our current culture. As culture changes, every generation is called to do this work.” We innovate to better embody the love of Christ, fulfill the mission of the church, and give the world a small glimpse of the New Creation.

Embracing An Adventure-Or-Die Mindset

“The culture is changing, the world is changing rapidly, and churches are facing change on an unprecedented scale. Churches and church leaders are becoming increasingly irrelevant, even marginalized. Shared corporate faith is viewed with cynicism at best, downright hostility at worst. The cultural advantage we experience during the seventeen centuries of Christendom has almost completely dissipated. [Much of our prior training has not prepared us to navigate] this immensely challenging moment in history. We have to learn to lead all over again.

“Leadership is always about personal and corporate transformation. But because we are hard-wired to resist change, every living system requires someone in it to live into and lead the transformation necessary to take us into the future we are resisting. The person who takes responsibility to live into the new future in a transformative way, in relationship to those in the system, is the leader. More than anything, this moment requires those of us in positions of authority (and even most of us who are not) to embrace an adventure-or-die mindset, and find the courage and develop the capacity for a new day.”

Tod Bolsinger, Canoeing the Mountains

Deep Work
#NorCalDistrict

First Order or Second Order Innovation?

Repairing our witness and revitalizing our mission in the world will require more than tinkering with our prevailing models of church. We will need to pursue what Len Wilson calls “First Order” innovation (disruptive change) which, once proven, leads to a series of “Second Order” innovations (incremental improvements) until the cycle of innovation has run its course and a new paradigm emerges. Most revitalization work is focused on the latter; “doing church bigger and better; better coffee, better music, better preaching, better hospitality, and so on.” While these strategies may provide a temporary boost in attendance, they are unlikely to help us

reach those who are not interested in (or even repelled by) our prevailing models of church. We will also need to sponsor entirely new forms of church, established primarily for the benefit of those who are not yet part of any church. Innovation is inherently risky. “The attempt to make safety our highest value, however, is self-defeating. We may try to remove risk, but we cannot,” warns Wilson. “Bad things happen. When our primary value is safety, we also get increased fragility, atrophy, and ultimately the very failure we so desperately want to avoid. The first necessary condition for innovation is the willingness to make leaps guided by faith.”

How to Try: Design Thinking

Design Thinking is a widely used creative process developed by Stanford Business School and employed by the world’s top companies. Through an iterative process of gathering information, developing ideas, building prototypes, and real-world testing, teams collaborate to solve a wide range of complex problems.

How might we apply these same principles to the vital work of the gospel? How can we unleash the full creative potential of the body of Christ to help people come to faith, grow in holiness, facilitate the healing of our communities, and join God in creating a world marked by love, mercy, and justice?





GATHERING WITH PURPOSE



Growing in Holiness

Our district community will engage in a purposeful rhythm of gathering for the sake of revitalizing our witness and reimagining our mission in the world. This practice ought to come naturally to Nazarenes. As a church in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, we value what John Wesley called “Christian Conferencing.” Wesley listed Christian Conferencing as one of five instituted means of grace, alongside prayer, studying the Scriptures, partaking in the Lord’s Supper, and fasting. According to Wesleyan scholar Kevin Watson, “Christian Conference was honest, direct, piercing conversation with other Christians that was intended to help the participants grow in holiness.”

Holiness is not just about personal piety, however. Holiness also requires us to participate in God’s redemptive mission the world. God’s holy love is expansive, transformative, and contagious. When the Holy Spirit inhabits and inspires God’s people, they are naturally compelled to share God’s love in word and deed with their neighbors. True Christian Conferencing, then, includes intentional conversation regarding how we might fulfill and strengthen our work and witness in the world.

In the months and years to come, we will gather regularly as a community to engage in the “deep work” of mission together. Some meetings will be larger and more public in nature; others will be smaller and more intimate. Sometimes we will gather to learn. Other times we will come together for prayer and discernment. We will gather to imagine new ways of being the church and bringing heaven on earth in our cities. Each gathering will be thoughtfully designed to move our people in the direction of positive change and collective renewal.



“

Christian Conference is honest, direct, piercing conversation with other Christians intended to help us grow in holiness.

”

Spaces of Connection

Joseph Myers identifies five different “spaces” that humans use to develop communication and connections: public, social, personal, transparent, and divine. People act differently in each context, but all the contexts are important to our growth and wellbeing. John Wesley’s use of societies, classes, and bands is an example of the strategic use of different spaces and groupings to help people grow in Christlikeness.

- **The Public Context** exists where people gather in their 100s around a shared outside resource. In this environment, the focus is on engaging with the outside resource, rather than building relational depth with others who are present.
- **The Social Context** is the range between 20 and 70 people, where we seek to build affinity with others. In this context, three things happen: we build relationships, identify with whom we would like to become closer friends, and reveal elements of our identity and our journey.
- **The Personal Context** forms in groups of 3 to 12, where we are comfortable sharing more private information. Think, for instance, of good friends talking over a meal, revealing personal thoughts and feelings about their ongoing lives and relationships. In this environment of acceptance and physical closeness, we are able to experience a genuine depth of friendship.
- **The Transparent Context** is when you are with just 1-2 others in close relationship. Characterized by complete openness and candor, nothing is held back in this context, echoing the Biblical ideal of being “naked and yet unashamed.”



The Divine Context represents God’s direct interactions with us at a one-on-one level. Our focus shifts from relationships with others to being alone with our Creator and Redeemer, as He encounters us in our inner world. This in turn resources us to engage more fruitfully in each of the other four Contexts.



Here are some ways our district community facilitates Christian Conferencing in the public, social, personal, and transparent contexts:



Public Context

LEAD Day: In January, ministerial candidates and ordained clergy gather for a day of theological reflection and equipping for pastoral leadership.

District Assembly: We gather annually in May to cast vision, conduct church business, ordain ministers, and celebrate what God is doing in our community.

Pastors and Families Retreat: Each November, our pastors and their families retreat together to spend time in God's presence and encourage each other.

Social Context

Crucial Conversation Days: Our community gathers periodically to build friendships, ask big questions, and have courageous conversations about what it means to be God's church in a complex and changing world. What does Christian holiness look like in our context? What are our biggest challenges and how might we face them together? How can we present a credible and compelling gospel witness, individually and collectively?

Personal Context

Zone Gatherings: Our churches are organized into missional zones. Pastors in each zone gather bi-monthly to share how they have distilled our mission, vision, and goals into actionable strategies. Participants offer feedback, accountability, and support, spurring one another toward greater faithfulness and fruitfulness in mission.

Transparent Context

Band Meetings: John Wesley urged believers to form voluntary, intimate cell groups to facilitate their growth in Christian holiness, love, and purity of heart. Similarly, we strongly encourage pastors (as well as laypeople) to form close relationships with 1-2 colleagues and meet as often as necessary to provide friendship, encouragement, and accountability in their daily walk with the Lord.

Engaging in Deep Work Together

In a rapidly changing and complex culture, there are no “silver bullets” or one-size-fits-all solutions. The church must learn to think and work in ways that are reflective, adaptive, collaborative, and generative. Coming together to ask big questions and solve complex challenges is essential to the work of renewal. In our rhythm of Christian Conferencing, we will engage in five kinds of work together: Discerning, Distilling, Designing, Doing, and Debriefing

Discerning

We gather to prayerfully discern God’s voice and activity in the world. What is happening in our neighborhoods? How is God moving? What is the Spirit saying to the church? How will we respond in faithful obedience as a community?

Distilling

We work together to clarify our mission, values, strategy, and measures of fruitfulness. How can we communicate what God is asking us to do in clear, simple, and actionable language?

Designing

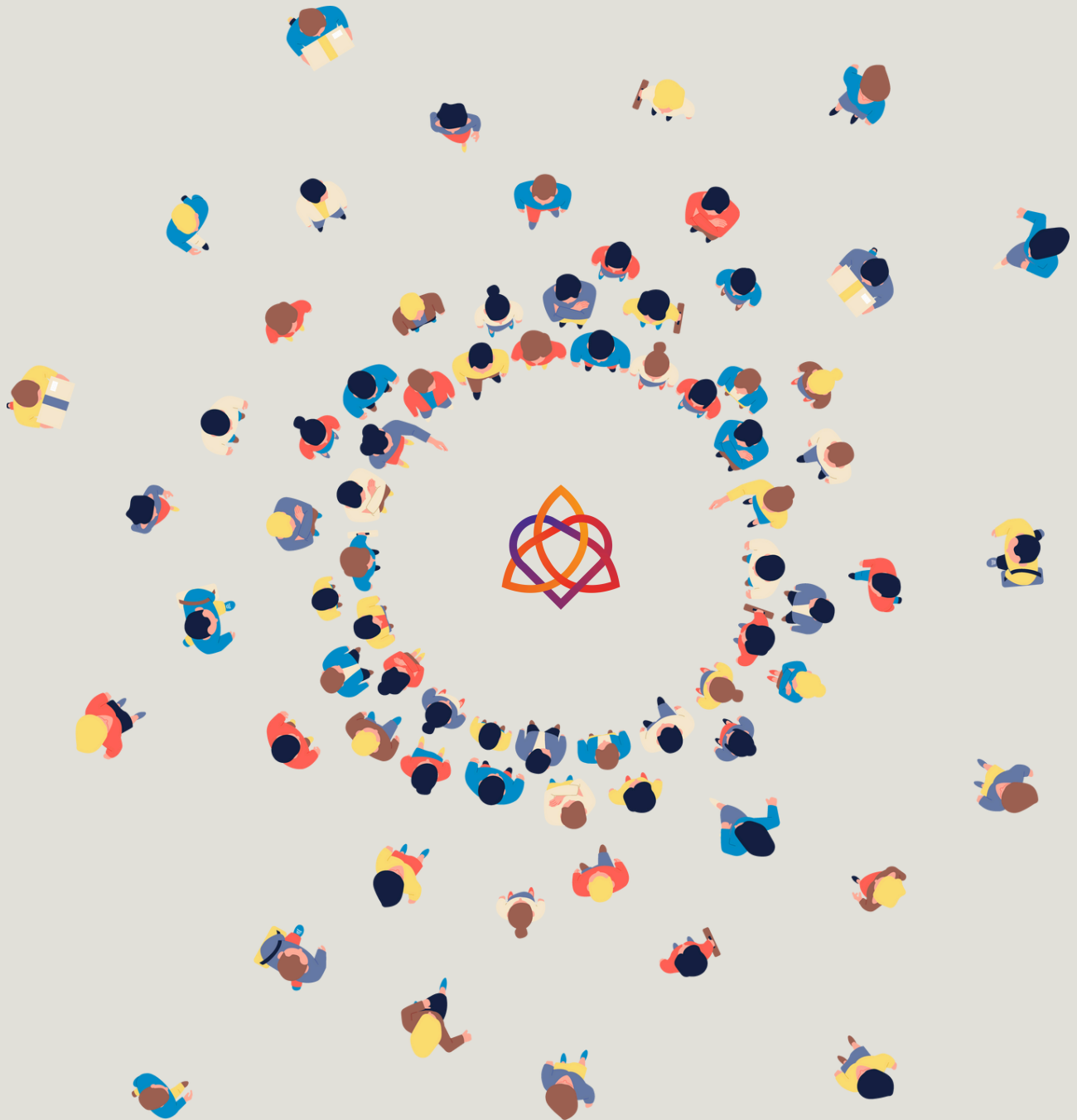
We gather to determine how to accomplish what God is asking of us. We innovate new strategies for mission and improve upon existing methods. We harness the creativity, gifts, and experience of our people for the sake of renewal.

Doing

Walking in faith, we transition from prayer and planning to execution and accomplishment, testing new methods of mission in the real world. We create a cadence of accountability so that God’s purposes may be accomplished.

Debriefing

We evaluate our work together. Did we achieve what we set out to do? What went well? What did not go as planned? Were there any unintended outcomes or surprising benefits? Should we try again? If so, what might we do differently?



COMMUNITY THEMES



year one
reconnecting the body



year two
repairing our witness



year three
renewing our mission

MONTHLY COMMUNITY GATHERING RHYTHM

Northern California District Church of the Nazarene

january LEAD Day	july Crucial Conversations
february Zone Gatherings	august Zone Gatherings
march Crucial Conversations	september Crucial Conversations
april Zone Gatherings	october Zone Gatherings
may District Assembly	november Pastors & Families Retreat
june Zone Gatherings	december Zone Gatherings

public context
100+ people

social context
20-70 people

personal context
3-12 people

District Assembly

District Assembly is the annual business gathering of our community, in which we cast vision, elect officers, receive reports, ordain ministers, and celebrate what God is doing through our churches.

Design Approach

The bulk of our assembly is focused on conversations around our shared mission, vision, and goals as a community. Official business is kept to a minimum so that we may give primary attention to current challenges and future opportunities. The district superintendent's report to the assembly is less concerned with statistical data, but rather seeks to answer the question, "What is the Spirit of God saying to the churches, and how shall we respond?" Similarly, pastors share their observations about the movement of God in their own contexts, and how their people are responding accordingly.

Assembly Theme

The theme for this year's assembly is, "The Whole Church for the Whole World." How can we invite, equip, and empower every believer for meaningful participation in God's redemptive mission? What does it mean to be part of a district community? What expectations ought we to have of one another as siblings in Christ and servants of God? As a Family on Mission, how might we share our knowledge, skills, resources, and connections to support the flourishing of each local church?

Key Assembly Highlights

International Worship Night: As a diverse community of congregations that includes more than 35 nationalities and that minister in at least 18 languages, we begin our assembly with a celebration service featuring multilingual worship, personal testimonies, and inspirational messages from pastors of varying ethnicities and cultures.

District Superintendent's Report to the Assembly: Our superintendent articulates, celebrates, and reinforces the shared values, aspirations, and achievements of the community, while honestly acknowledging the obstacles the church faces in fulfilling her mission in our context.

Collaboration Stories: As a people called to embody mutuality and generosity, we share stories of how our churches are partnering with each other and their cities for the sake of the gospel. Examples include small congregations that hold joint baptisms or retreats, churches that partner with local businesses to address food insecurity, and immigrant communities that work together to make clergy education more affordable and accessible.

Resurrection Stories: The church as we know it is not dying, but it is undeniably changing. We take time to highlight new church plants and creative mission within our district. We honor legacy congregations nearing the end of their life cycle that are proactively giving away their resources to others who will carry on the work of the church among new people groups and the next generation.

New Creation Stories: We believe, preach, and embody a holistic gospel that goes beyond individual salvation to encompass the renewal of all creation in Christ. We share stories of how God is calling and empowering our people for works of mercy and justice in their communities, especially those efforts that seek to address systemic issues that contribute to suffering.

Spotlight on Missional Zones: Although celebrating the achievements of individual congregations is appropriate and good, we want to hear how God is at work across our district. Pastors report on evidence of God's activity in their missional zone, seeking to answer the question, "What is God up to in your city, and how has the Spirit been inviting you to participate?"

District Assembly



LEAD Day

LEAD (Leadership Equipping, Assessment, & Dialogue) Day is an opportunity for licensed and ordained clergy to engage in theological reflection and practical training for pastoral leadership. Ministerial candidates in the ordination track are assessed throughout the day by members of the District Board of Ministry as required annually by our denominational licensing process.

Design Approach

Participants are grouped into cohorts and alternate between large-group plenary sessions and small-group discussions throughout the day. Discussion is oriented around the theological implications and practical expression of one of our 16 Articles of Faith, from the perspective of pastoral ministry. Guest lecturers include faculty from our various theological schools and local church ministry practitioners.

Orienting Questions

Much of the waning commitment, internal dysfunction, and damaged witness of the church is rooted in a lack of clarity regarding our ecclesiology. What is the essential nature and mission of the church? Who are we as the people of God? What expectations ought we to have of one another? What should happen when we gather and why? What is the role of the pastor in shaping the life of the community?

Plenary Sessions

- 1. Article XI: The Church (Diane Leclerc)**
What do Nazarenes believe about the church, and why does it matter?
- 2. Ecclesial Calling & Character (Diane Leclerc)**
What is the essential calling and character of the church? How does this inform the work of pastoral ministry?
- 3. Ecclesiology in Context (Jacobi Campbell)**
“The Church is a historical reality that organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms.” What do we mean by this phrase?
- 4. “Will it Church?” (Creative Exercise)**
What are the essential qualities and practices that identify a community as a church?

Intended Outcomes

1. The community fosters theological coherence and denominational unity by clarifying and reaffirming our shared ecclesiology.
2. The community invests in the development of future ministers and evaluates their calling, character, and competence for ministry.
3. The community considers non-traditional expressions of church that may help us reach new people groups.
4. The community creates a culture of continual learning and charitable, generative dialogue.
5. The community deepens their relationships as colleagues and siblings in Christ.

Creative Exercise

Read the case study below and discuss whether or not this community would qualify as a “church” according to our ecclesiology. If yes, discuss whether or not it is an *effective* church. If not, discuss what elements need to be added for it to be considered a faithful expression of the church.

The Potter’s House: A dozen potters at varying skill levels gather together at a pottery studio. They create projects together as they discuss Scripture and listen to worship songs.

- The community’s approach to spiritual formation involves pottery metaphors to describe how the Holy Spirit molds people into Christlikeness, just as we create pottery art in the likeness of our desired designs.
- Participants practice contemplative prayer as they work and share how they are hearing and responding to God.
- Created artwork is sold to raise money for a local elementary school arts program where members volunteer.

LEAD Day



Pastors & Families Retreat

Pastors and Families Retreat is an opportunity for our community to experience rest and renewal in the Lord, cultivate deep and meaningful friendships with one another, and engage in practices that foster connection, belonging, and wellbeing.

Design Approach

Our retreats are designed to help our district become an “attachment village” - a matrix of relationships that help foster a sense of rootedness, belonging, and connection. Sessions focus less on content delivery and more on community building. The schedule is light, providing ample time for play, rest, and conversation. Spouses and children are encouraged to attend, creating a sense of family.

Retreat Theme

Reconnecting the Body: How can we strengthen our attachments to God and each other, so that we might be tethered to one another in love and unified in purpose? How well do we know one another? What stories do we carry? How can we embrace our own belovedness, as well as the belovedness of others? What does it mean to be one another’s keepers, and why is that vital for our flourishing?

Plenary Sessions

1. **The God Who Sees Me: Genesis 16:1-13**
When have you felt misunderstood or rejected by people, but seen by God?
2. **The Encounter at the Well (John 4:3-26)**
How does trauma affect us? How do we care for those impacted by trauma as Christians?
3. **The Beloved Disciple (John 13:21-26)**
How can we experience such safety in Christ that we can be completely vulnerable? How can we become safe people for each other?
4. **Becoming One (John 17:20-26)**
How can we become an “attachment village” that is deeply tethered to each other in love?

Spiritual Practices

1. **Story Circles** - We share stories in order to see and understand one another better.
2. **Lectio Divina** - We make space for prayerful contemplation of God’s Word.
3. **Group Bible Study** - We nourish one another with personal insights revealed by the Spirit.
4. **Walking Together** - We linger in conversation while delighting in God’s creation.
5. **Eating Together** - We gather around tables to enjoy food and fellowship together.
6. **Playing Together** - We experience laughter and joy, remembering we are God’s children.

Whole-Brained Discipleship

In *The Other Half of Church: Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation*, neuro-theologian Jim Wilder explains that forming mature followers of Christ requires engaging both sides of our brains. Most of our discipleship strategies, however, focus on the left side of the brain. We ignore the side of the brain that specializes in character formation. “Left-brained discipleship emphasizes beliefs, doctrine, willpower, and strategies but neglects right-brain loving attachments, joy, emotional development, and identity. Ignoring right-brain relational development creates Christians who believe in God’s love but have difficulty experiencing it in daily life.”

“Our right brain governs the whole range of relational life: whom we love, our emotional reactions to our surroundings, our ability to calm ourselves, and our identity, both as individuals and as a community. The right side manages our strongest relational connections (both to people and God) and our experience of emotional connectedness to others. Character formation, which is a primary responsibility of the church, is governed by the right brain, not the left brain. If we want to grow and transform our character into the character of Jesus, we must involve activities that stimulate and develop the right brain.”

Pastors & Families Retreat



Crucial Conversations

Crucial Conversation Days gather our community to cultivate friendships, ask big questions, and have courageous conversations about what it means to be God's church in a complex and changing world. What does Christian holiness look like in our context? What challenges do we face and how might we overcome them together? How can we present a credible and compelling witness in the world?

Design Approach

The community grapples with a question that elicits "honest, direct, piercing conversation" that challenges us to grow in holiness. While personal piety is an important dimension of the holy life, the conversation centers on how we might repair our witness and renew our mission as the church. A trained facilitator orients participants to the matter to be considered, which is then explored in depth.

Orienting Question

The church is rightly concerned about unity these days. Unity amongst believers is essential to the credibility and efficacy of our witness (John 17:20-23) In what ways has the church become a reflection of, rather than a Christlike response to, the polarization in our world? What might the Holy Spirit be saying to us in this cultural moment, and what does a faithful response look like for our community?

Potential Facilitators

1. **Dan Boone**, President of Trevecca Nazarene University, Author of *A Charitable Discourse: Talking About the Things That Divide Us*
2. **Althea Taylor**, Hawaii District Superintendent, an advocate for reconciliation in the church
3. **Michael Palmer**, Co-Founder of The Center for Spiritual Formation, Author of *Trenches and Tables*
4. **Rebecca Cataldi**, Sr. Director of Programs, International Center for Religion & Diplomacy

Proposed Agenda

1. Introduction to Orienting Question
2. Discussion: In what ways are we divided as a culture? How does this show up in the church?
3. Bible Study: John 17:20-26
4. Guided Reflection: What is God saying to our community? What is our "Kairos moment?"
5. Teaching: How can we have charitable and generative conversations about the things that divide us, in a uniquely Christian way?
6. Discussion: What did we learn today? What questions do we still have? How might we further our learning in this area?
7. Action: How will we respond to God as a community? What is our next faithful step?

Future Questions

- "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). The Lausanne Covenant affirms that it takes the whole church to share the whole gospel with the whole world. As a community, we want to empower every believer for full participation in the life and work of the church. In what ways are we, like the early Christians, overlooking the needs and gifts of some in our community, while giving preferential treatment to others? How might we work toward a culture of God-honoring diversity, equality, and belonging?
- "Our desire is that there might be equality. At the present, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need" (2 Cor. 8:13-14). We have called our people to radical generosity for the sake of the gospel, as is befitting the people of God. In what ways are our resources inadequately or unfairly distributed among our community, such that the life and ministry of some members is well supplied, while others lack what they need to succeed? What might God be saying to us about this imbalance?

Kairos Circle

Kansas City Underground

When we commit to follow Jesus, we are choosing to make Him Lord of every part of our life. That means we need to learn how to hear when He speaks, and become obedient to the new ways in which Jesus leads us. This might sound intimidating; however, we believe that we can learn to recognize where Jesus is speaking to us in the everyday places of life by recognizing Kairos moments.

In Mark 1:15, Jesus says, “The time has come, the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news.”

KAIROS MOMENT

The word that Mark uses for time in this passage is Kairos. The other Greek word for time is Chronos, where we get our word chronology, indicating a sequence of events. We’re all living on a timeline (Chronos). Kairos, rather than indicating a sequence of events, indicates a significant event has taken place. It’s an event that causes us to stop and ask some questions. It has some impact on our life. Kairos moments can be positive or negative, great or small: an argument with a spouse, a promotion, a friend moves away, a clean bill of health, an unexpected grade on a test. Kairos moments give us the opportunity to stop and ask, “Is this a place where Jesus wants to speak to me or lead me in a new way?”

KAIROS CIRCLE

When we recognize we’ve had a kairos moment, we can then enter the tool we call the Kairos Circle. This tool helps us process the event, moment, circumstance and

discover what about our life needs to change or adjust to come more in line with the ways of Jesus. Using this tool, we are trying to answer two primary questions: “What is Jesus saying to me?” and “What am I going to do about it?”

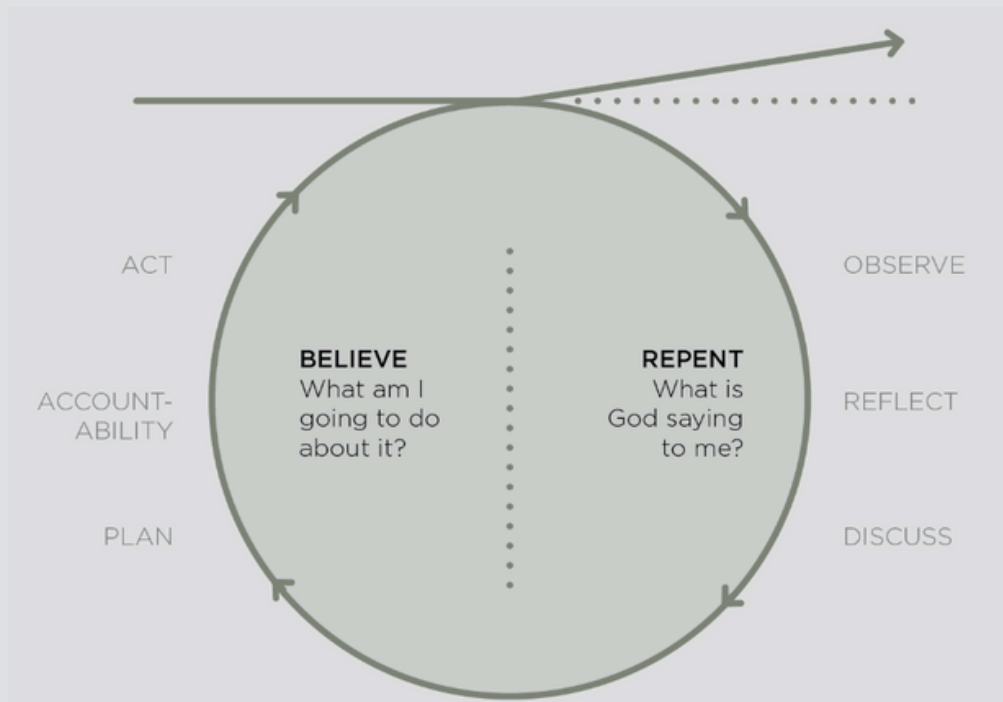
REPENT – What Is Jesus Saying to Me?

In Mark 1:15, Jesus says, “Repent and believe the good news.” The first part, repentance, means that we need a change of mind and heart. The word communicates movement. We were moving in one direction, and now we will move in another direction. In the first half of the circle we observe the event, we reflect on the event, and we discuss with others. At the bottom of the circle we are trying to answer, specifically, “What is Jesus saying to me?”

BELIEVE – What am I Going to do About It?

The second half of the circle is “believe.” Like repent, believing indicates movement. Repentance is movement away from something, belief is movement towards a new way. Before continuing around the circle, we must answer the question in response to what we discovered Jesus is saying. We must answer, very specifically, “What am I going to do about it?” Upon arriving at this answer we can now do three more things: Make a plan, invite accountability, and finally act.

When we have moved completely through the Kairos Circle we should come out on a new trajectory, living in new and transformed ways that are more in line with the character and ways of Jesus.



Zone Gatherings

Pastors gather to share how they are turning our mission, vision, and goals into actionable strategies in their local context. They process ministry challenges, workshop possible solutions, and engage in the deep work of Discerning, Distilling, Designing, Doing, and Debriefing. Participants help each other become more faithful and fruitful in mission through mutual accountability and support.

Design Approach

Although participants spend some time in fellowship and prayer, the focus of this meeting is on mission fidelity and fruitfulness. Pastors tap into the passions, knowledge, and experiences of the group as they seek to design strategies for effective ministry. In each meeting, the group uses a church in their zone as a case study, collaborating to design creative solutions to the adaptive challenges they are facing.

Sample Case Study

First Church of the Nazarene is situated in a diverse community of Hispanic, Black, and Asian residents, most of whom are first-generation immigrants and speak a language other than English at home. The congregation has dwindled to less than 20 white, lifelong Christians over the age of 65. Their pastor is nearing retirement. Ministry costs are growing and money is tight. Is revitalization possible? If so, how?

Generating Insights

1. What is the problem we are trying to solve? Is it the right issue to focus on, or should we be focusing our attention elsewhere?
2. How can we describe the problem in greater detail to better understand what is going on?
3. What information is needed before we start designing possible solutions? How would we obtain that knowledge?
4. Who should be included in any efforts to solve the problem, and why?
5. Who can we learn from? What resources and people are available to us?
6. What, if anything, has been tried already to solve the problem? How did it go?

Designing Solutions

1. Begin with prayer. Ask the Lord for inspiration and help as you begin the creative process.
2. Generate ideas. Creative exercises include:
 - The Mash-Up: Take two ideas and combine them to create something new.
 - Other People's Shoes: Imagine going through a day in someone else's life.
 - Brainstorm: Come up with as many ideas as possible within a short time frame.
 - eStorm: A brainstorming session, but through email or text (good for introverts)
3. Cluster and Choose. Group ideas together, merge as needed, and look for themes. Vote on an idea to develop further.

Testing and Refining

Select an idea to develop into a working prototype. Use the Mission Canvas tool developed by the TryTank Institute to quickly flesh out the idea (time needed: 15 min). For a fuller explanation of the prototyping stage of the creative process, see [*How to Try: Design Thinking and Church Innovation*](#) by Lorenzo Lebrija.

In between zone meetings, the pastor whose congregation was used as a case study will lead a similar process of inquiry, ideation, and innovation in his or her local context. The congregation will develop a prototype project or experience that attempts to address the problem, run the "experiment," and debrief the experience afterward.

At the next meeting, the pastor will report back to the group and share any successes, failures, and insights gleaned from the experiment. The group may continue workshoping the next iteration of the same project, or choose another adaptive challenge to study.

Zone Gatherings

Additional Case Study Examples

- Mission Church is located in the heart of San Francisco. The city is slowly emptying as residents, especially young adults and families, relocate due to the high cost of living, rising crime, and greater flexibility to work remotely. How can the church adapt and stay relevant in its community?
- Casa de Dios is a small Hispanic congregation made up of working-class immigrant families. They rent space in a community center on Sunday evenings to worship because they can't afford to purchase their own building, limiting their growth. Additionally, the church is having a hard time retaining young adults, who leave to join English-speaking churches or end up abandoning the faith.
- River of Life is a decentralized network of house churches that is gaining appeal with those who are "spiritual but not religious." The community is vibrant but messy. Interpersonal drama, syncretism, cultural tension, and confusion over who is "in charge" are threatening to undo the good work that has been done. The leaders are unsure how to proceed.

Creating a Mission Canvas

"A Mission Canvas is a one-page business plan that allows you to look at nine important areas of consideration on one simple page. What we call Mission Canvas is an adaptation of the Lean Canvas from the business world. Rather than spending weeks developing a long business plan that is dozens of pages that won't usually be read in full and will need to change when it meets reality, the Mission Canvas is quick and easy to adapt. You should be able to finish it in fifteen minutes. Each of the nine areas offers the opportunity to say, "Have we thought this part through?" This holistic approach lets you realize what you may still be missing and where you're really clear. It's also an incredible tool for sharing an idea with others and to get buy-in from the congregation. It works because it's easy to use. When you need to adapt it, it takes just a few minutes to change the canvas so that it's always the most up-to-date version. The Mission Canvas is really a working, living document."

Lebrija, Lorenzo. How to Try: Design Thinking and Church Innovation (p.88-90). Church Publishing Inc.

(1) DESIGN QUESTION	(3) STAKEHOLDERS	(4) ELEVATOR PITCH	(6) PARTNERS	(2) OUR SOLUTION
EXISTING ALTERNATIVES	(9) KEY METRICS		(5) PATH TO TARGETS	
(8) EXPENSES		(7) FUNDING SOURCES		

Mission Canvas is adapted from [Lean Canvas](#) and is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. We have changed the headings to reflect mission rather than business.

<https://www.trytank.org/missioncanvas.html>

Band Meetings

John Wesley urged believers to form voluntary, intimate cell groups called “bands” to facilitate their growth in Christian holiness, love, and purity of heart. Similarly, we strongly encourage pastors (as well as laypeople) to form close relationships with 1-2 colleagues and meet as often as necessary to provide friendship, encouragement, and accountability in their daily walk with the Lord.

Design Approach

Participants may gather in any environment conducive to honest and vulnerable conversation. Though a list of discussion prompts will be provided, the group may opt to engage in free-flowing conversation, receive group spiritual direction, study Scripture together, or any other activities that may be of some benefit. The goal, however, should be to facilitate heart-to-heart connection between close friends.

Suggested Prompts

Spiritual Direction Questions

1. How am I encountering God? What is prayer like for me right now?
2. What is nurturing my relationship with God and keeping me going? What is weighing me down or intruding upon my relationship with God?
3. What is different about my current season of life? What season am I anticipating?
4. How am I being shaped by the triumphs and trials of my life?
5. What is my view of God right now?
6. What do I need or desire from God? What do I imagine God desires for me?
7. What commands and receives my best time and energy?
8. Who or what is getting the most air time in my thought life right now?
9. How are my relationships honored and given quality time?

Questions from Dave Guiles, Director of Grace Brethren International Missions

1. How have you sensed God’s presence in your life during this past week?
2. Have you received a specific answer to your prayers? What was it?
3. Have you spoken with a non-believer about your faith in Jesus Christ? With whom?
4. To whom have you shown God’s love during this past week?
5. What have you learned about God in your personal Bible reading this past week?
6. As a result of your Bible reading this past week, how have you determined to better obey God?
7. What area of your life do you feel that God most wants to change? What steps have you taken?
8. What good habit do you feel God wants to form in your life? What steps have you taken?

Five Simple Questions for Life Transformation (Phil Helfer, Los Alto Brethren Church)

1. How have you experienced God in your life this week?
2. What is God teaching you?
3. How are you responding to His prompting?
4. Do you have a need to confess any sin?
5. How did you do with your reading this week?

The Kairos Circle

- What is God telling you to do?
- What are you going to do about it?

SOURCES:

- Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God: Multiplying Disciples Through Life Transformation Groups*, Church Smart Resources
- Rachel Hehr, “Asking Questions as a Spiritual Practice.” <https://www.curateministries.org/curateblog/2019/5/28/asking-questions-as-a-spiritual-practice>

John Wesley's Small Groups: Models of Christian Community

Dr. Mark Maddix

Being a believer requires community and fellowship.

We cannot live as if we are alone on an island and be a Christian, since faith is always communal. One aspect of our faith formation is participating in spiritual accountability groups. John Wesley believed that there is 'no personal holiness without social holiness.'

For Wesley, living holy lives required believers to share their lives in intimate fellowship on a regular basis. His development of small groups revolutionized 18th-century England and provided a framework to help people grow in 'holiness of heart and life.' Small groups provided a context in which seekers could receive support, accountability, and encouragement. This was especially important considering the evils of society and the disarray of the culture. Wesley's system of mutual accountability was divided into three formative aspects: **societies, classes, and bands.**

Societies primarily focused on educational channels through which the tenets of Methodism were presented. These tenets were taught in a large classroom setting primarily through lecture, preaching, public reading, hymn singing, and 'exhorting.' In societies, people sat in rows, women and men separated, where they listened to a prepared lecture. They were not given opportunity to respond or give feedback. John and Charles Wesley led the societies until the movement expanded and lay assistants were delegated to oversee them in the absence of ordained clergy. The major aim was to present scriptural truths and have those truths clearly understood.

Class Meetings were the most influential instructional unit in Methodism and probably Wesley's greatest contribution to spiritual growth. Class meetings get so much credit because they radically transformed England's working masses. The success centered on the instructional design of behavioral change. Classes were intimate gatherings of 10 or 12 people who met weekly for personal supervision of their spiritual growth. Rules for the United Societies were the primary framework for the class meetings. Rules specified the basic process of 'inquiry' as to the subject matter of 'how their souls prospered.'

Class meetings were coeducational experiences that included women in leadership. Included in the sessions were those of diverse age, social standing, and spiritual readiness. Wesley wanted the classes to represent a cross-section of Methodism. Also, the classes provided a place for believers to accept people from various social backgrounds. This helped break up the rigid class standards of 18th century England. The leaders would share honestly about their failures, sins, temptations, or inner battles. They were the role models for others. Class meetings revolved around personal experience, not doctrine or biblical information. Perfect love was the goal of the class meetings. It was a place that provided support, encouragement, and spiritual maturation as Methodists sought to live holy lives.

Bands facilitated affective redirection. Unlike the class meeting, the band was a homogenous grouping by gender, age, and marital status. Bands were voluntary cells of people who professed a clear Christian faith and who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intention. Bands included ruthless honesty and frank openness. Members sought to improve their attitudes, emotions, feelings, intentions, and affections.

A central function of the band was what Wesley termed 'close conversation.' By this term he meant soul-searching examination, not so much of behavior and ideas, but of motive and heartfelt impressions.

Certainly, we cannot replicate Wesley's process completely, but we can transmit the important principles into our local congregations. Gathering in groups for spiritual accountability can help foster our faith and help us grow in Christlikeness. Being a faithful follower of Christ requires our investment in the journey of others.

Wesley provides a holistic approach to Christian formation, something that we can adapt in a Western individualistic culture. We are reminded of Wesley's admonition, "There is 'no holiness without social holiness.'"

<https://www.holinesstoday.org/john-wesley-small-groups-christian-community>



God Questions

Dwight Zscheile, Michael Binder, and Tessa Pinkstaff

"In our work with congregations, we usually hear what Alan Roxburgh calls "church questions." These are questions like, How can we get more people to join our church? How can our church meet a need in the neighborhood? How can we attract more young families? These questions are understandable, arising from genuine concern for the church and for our neighbors. However, they tend to default toward a posture of fixing the church. Our focus becomes centered on what we can do to sustain or grow the church as an institution. God's role tends to drop out of view.

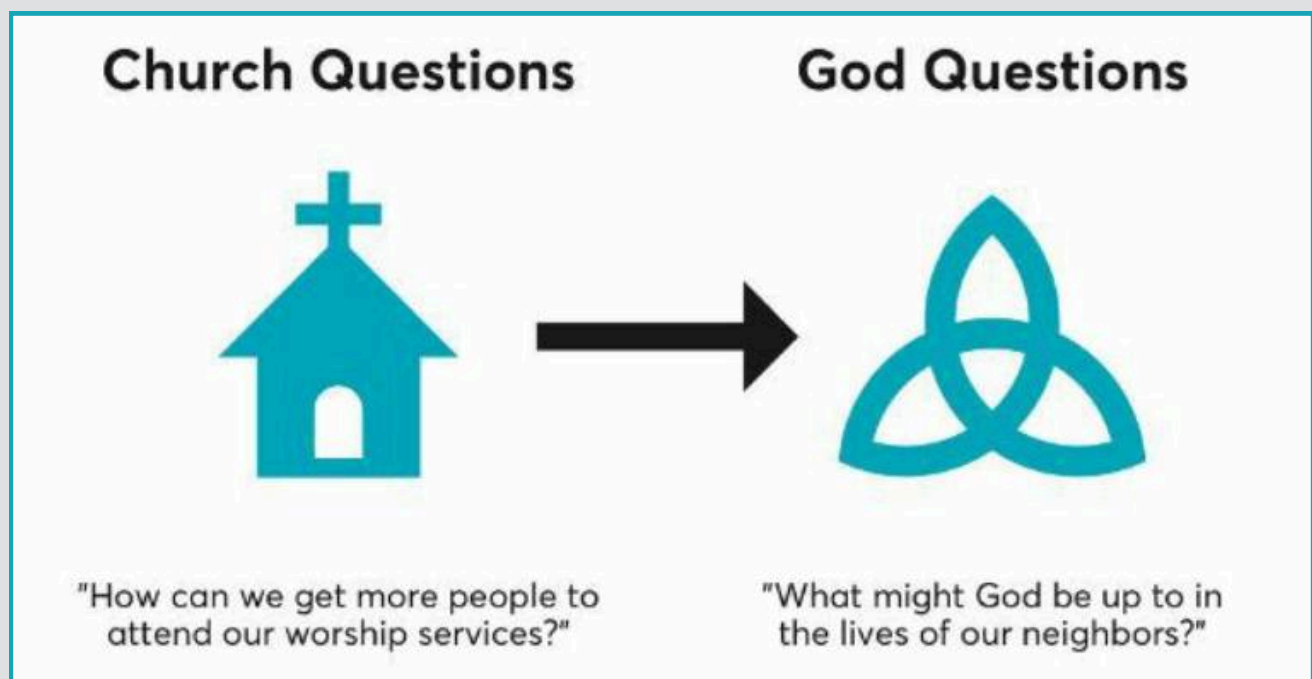
"Moreover, our neighbors can easily become abstractions ("young families," "the needy") rather than actual people with whom we have relationships and whose stories we know. We can turn them into objects of attraction or fixing according to our visions and plans for them. We can lose sight of their needs, desires, feelings, will, and power - their agency as subjects in their own right, people among whom God is already at work.

"[We] invite ministry leaders to change the questions their communities ask from "church questions" to "God questions." God questions can't be answered through strategic plans and managerial solutions. They require a different posture of listening, discernment (paying attention to God), experimentation, and reflection in community. They draw us closer to God and our neighbors - not as objects but as particular people like Lydia in Acts 16, with unique stories, yearnings, and dreams.

"[Our neighbors] may be asking questions like, Why is there evil? How can humans find deeper purpose in the world? Where can I find hope? How can I be unified with people with whom I differ and disagree?

"God questions" ask, What might God be up to in the lives of our neighbors? Where has God been present in the history of our congregation? How might the Spirit be moving in the lives of our church's members or calling us to join God's work in the neighborhood?

Zscheile, Dwight; Binder, Michael; Pinkstaff, Tessa. Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future (pp. 7-8).



Mission Canvas

(1) DESIGN QUESTION	(3) STAKEHOLDERS	(4) ELEVATOR PITCH	(6) PARTNERS	(2) OUR SOLUTION
	(9) KEY METRICS		(5) PATH TO TARGETS	
EXISTING ALTERNATIVES				
(8) EXPENSES	(7) FUNDING SOURCES			

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Resources



- Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups, Ruth Haley Barton
- Deep Roots, Wild Branches: Revitalizing the Church in the Blended Ecology, Michael Beck
- An Ecumenical Field Guide for Fresh Expressions Michael Beck
- Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory, Tod Bolsinger
- Family on Mission, Mike Breen
- Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus. Become Like Him. Do As He Did., John Mark Comer
- New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church, Ian Mobsby
- A Failure of Nerve, Revised Edition: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, Edwin Friedman
- Longing for Spring: A New Vision for Wesleyan Community, Elaine Heath
- The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, Ron Heifetz
- The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating Apostolic Movements, Alan Hirsch
- Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas, Gregory Jones
- The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best, Irwin Ince
- Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age, Jay Kim
- The Patient Ferment of the Early Church, Alan Kreider
- How to Try: Design Thinking and Church Innovation, Lorenzo Lebrija
- Essential Church: A Wesleyan Ecclesiology, Diane Leclerc and Mark Maddix
- The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business, Patrick Lencioni
- A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture, Scot McKnight
- Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World, Stuart Murray
- Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World, Cal Newport
- The Lord as Their Portion: The Story of the Religious Orders, Elizabeth Rapley
- The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Sean Salai
- Seven Levers: Missional Strategies for Conferences, Robert Schnase
- The Good and Beautiful Community, James Bryan Smith
- The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus, Rich Villodas
- Greater Things: The Work of the New Creation, Len Wilson
- Broken Signposts: How Christianity Makes Sense of the World, N.T. Wright
- A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism, Mildred Bangs Wynkoop
- Postcards from Babylon: The Church in American Exile, Brian Zahnd
- Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future, Dwight Zscheile.

About the Northern California District



Mission and Vision

- The **mission** of the Church of the Nazarene is to make Christlike disciples in the nations.
- The **mission** of the Northern California District Church of the Nazarene is to make Christlike communities of disciples in our neighborhoods and the nations.
- Our **vision** is to become a kingdom of priests and a family on mission. We desire to call, empower, and mobilize every member and every church to join in God's redemptive mission by bearing witness to the lordship of Christ and the coming kingdom of God and making Christlike disciples in every city and among every people group in Northern California (Matt. 28:18-20, Acts 1:8).

The Work of the District

- **Manual 200.** A district is an entity made up of interdependent local churches organized to facilitate the mission of each local church through mutual support, the sharing of resources, and collaboration.
- **Manual 22.2.** We are agreed on the necessity of a superintendency that shall complement and assist the local church in the fulfilling of its mission and objectives. The superintendency shall (1) Build morale, (2) Provide motivation, (3) Supply management and method assistance, and (4) Organize and encourage organization of new churches and missions everywhere.

Six Key Missional Shifts

We need to cultivate churches that are nimble, responsive, distributed, sustainable, resilient, engaged, and multigenerational. This will require at least six key “shifts” in the way we think about and fulfill our mission.

1. From organizing our churches around **worship** to organizing our whole lives around **mission**.
2. From a culture where ministry is done by the **few** to one where ministry is done by the **many**.
3. From a focus on **short-term survival** to a commitment to **long-term sustainability**.
4. From a culture of symbolic **diversity** to one of full **belonging and equality**.
5. From a relationship of **mistrust** among our neighbors to one where we are **trusted** friends and welcome **partners** in the flourishing of our cities.
6. From relying on **founding generations** to keep our churches going to releasing **future generations** to carry out our mission today and into the future.



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