

IS THERE ROOM IN THE INN?
A SYSTEMS THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON
CONGREGATIONAL CAPACITIES FOR MISSION
AND THE MATTER OF SOCIOLOGICAL SPACE

by

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ABSTRACT

*Is There Room in the Inn?
A Systems Theory Perspective on Congregational Capacities
for Mission and the Matter of Sociological Space*

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This study identifies ten ELCA Lutheran congregations that have plateaued from 125 to 250 in average worship per week from 1990 to 2005, in settings where populations are growing. It seeks to identify attitudes and expectations among three groups within the congregation—pastors, key leaders, and regular members—around the issue of mission, evangelism, and church growth.

A three-phase sequential mixed methods exploratory approach—QUAL/QUAN/QUAL—examines reasons why these congregations remain a certain size. The research assesses themes of system stress, social and leadership capacities, and the dynamics of homeostasis, which would support a systems theory perspective for growth capacity.

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I acknowledge I am in bondage to sin and cannot free myself.

I acknowledge a deep gratitude to Christ my savior.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Research Topic	8
Significance of Research	11
Hypothesis	11
Key Terms	12
Key Questions	14
Ethical Considerations.....	14
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	16
Systems Theory	28
Conclusion.....	36
3. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS	38
4. METHODOLOGY	64
Significance of Research	71
5. RESULTS.....	73
Descriptive Statistics	77
Summary	84
Oswald Survey Questions.....	84
Likert Survey Questions	86
Inferential Statistics	89
Qualitative Interview Findings.....	96
6. CONCLUSION	107
Research Conclusion	113
EPILOGUE	121
Appendices	
A. OSWALD SURVEY QUESTIONS	125
B. TABLES FOR OSWALD QUESTIONS	128
C. KEY LEADER/PASTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	132
D. CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY	133
BIBLIOGRAPHY	135

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
MAS	Minneapolis Area Synod
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ARDA	The Association of Religion Data Archives
GST	General Systems Theory
FST	Family Systems Theory
WCC	World Council of Churches
CFO	Commission on Faith and Order
CGM	Church Growth Movement
LS	Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota
FTS	Fuller Theological Seminary
<i>JPT</i>	<i>Journal of Psychology & Theology</i>
QUAN	Quantitative Research
QUAL	Qualitative Research
SPSS	Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (data mining software)
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The church is currently in a time of trying to find itself. Over the last 50 years, there has been much upheaval and change in society throughout the world. Never have so many things changed in such a short period. In the midst of all these many changes, the church seeks to redefine itself and is still in the process of doing so. Ecclesiology and mission have become topics of keen interest in the church as the church tries to redefine itself, its role, and its purpose.

I do not propose to have an answer for the larger question of ecclesiology and mission, but I would like to address a foundational question that relates to these matters. This has been a burning issue for me since my first years as a pastor. It relates to a theological metaphor of the birth of Christ. When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, there is no room in the inn. This is a statement worth considering carefully. Since becoming a pastor, I have been concerned with how a human community can become a closed, exclusive community, leaving no room for the outsider. If Christ comes in the margins, as he did on that night so long ago and throughout his ministry, how well do we as a church and as congregations attend to these margins?

It raises core issues for the church and these such as: What does the church exist for? Does the church exist for the world? If so (and I believe it does), what does that mean? How does it exist for the world? To do good works? Many institutions exist to do good works. To proclaim the Gospel? Yes, of course, but to whom? To those already saved? Yes. The

children of those already saved? Yes. To the unsaved, the marginalized, the outcast, the unloved, the excluded? Yes, and especially to these. And if especially to these, then how are we doing as a church? As congregations? How do we proclaim the Gospel? Through word and deed? If marginalized people come into our congregations and there is not space for them, not just physical, but psychological and sociological, are we really proclaiming the Gospel of Christ?

Moving to a small town in my first call, somewhat naïve, I imagined finding a close-knit group of people who shared their whole lives openly. What I found, however, was a community of perceived insiders and many people who felt like outsiders. One woman in the congregation, when I raised this issue, said she married into the community 28 year ago and still, to this day, felt like an outsider. She felt excluded not just from the people of the town, *but also from the people of her own church*—her own Christian community! Can you imagine feeling like an outsider for 28 years in your own church? This was an active, friendly, likable, involved member of the church.

I remember my mother telling me that during her years living with my father in the military (20 years) she missed the sense of community she felt. Now, after 20 years of living in the same civilian community she still felt like an outsider. She longed for a sense of belonging, a sense of community. She believed in the military there was so much movement from place to place that people were either getting ready to leave, or just arriving and so there was not time for cliques to form, or *insider* social groups to form. Everyone was on the same level socially and there was a sense of immediate acceptance and community. In contrast, in civilian life, people who had grown up in a community had a common bond and shared a common experience, so that someone moving from another place could not understand or relate on the same level. Social systems can only tolerate a certain level of capacity and, when full, tend to exclude outsiders—even *when there are attempts to include them*. When

the social system is full it cannot by nature grow larger, but new systems must form to accommodate new growth.

Alice Mann refers to this as sociological space in her book, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition*.

The contrast to plateaus created solely by community demographics or physical space limitations, the glass-ceiling effect of a size transition will occur even when there are lots of unchurched people around and plenty of seats left. Growth in attendance levels off because of a shortage in ‘sociological space’—the way the congregation arranges its life will simply not support sustained involvement of more people than it already has. These size-related plateaus tend to be more mysterious to members and leaders because the causes are less visible and more cumulative in nature. At the boundary between sizes, many different hindrances converge to prevent the assimilation of new members and the full participation of those already on the rolls.¹

This shortage of sociological space is something we have all experienced to varying degrees throughout life. I had a profound experience of it once during my time at seminary. I remember the first week of school coming out of the cafeteria with my lunch tray looking for a place to sit. Someone sitting with a group of seniors must have recognized how green I looked and invited me to sit with them. I was grateful for their outreach. I sat and was introduced around the table. Once introductions were completed, the group, which was clearly a strongly connected group, went back to their conversation. Because they were at such a completely difference place in their education than me, I had little to offer the conversation and sat there feeling very much like an outsider—*because I was an outsider*. The truth of the matter was I was an outsider, and no amount of hospitality could change that fact. I did not have their experiences (yet) and did not have their connections (yet) and I did not have a shared life (yet). Therefore, feeling like an outsider *is what I should have felt like*.

This all came back when I was a senior at seminary and I saw someone come out of the lunchroom looking lost and uncertain. I invited them to sit with us and introduced them

¹Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 10.

around the table. I remembered how it felt to be so new, but realized there was nothing I could do to change it for this person, even if I tried to draw them into the conversation and involve them. I realized then we would never be in the same place or feel the same sense of belonging to this particular group.

In my first call as a pastor, I served a rural congregation that was 75 years old. It was a church that had been on a plateau for 12 years in both membership growth and worship attendance. I felt a need to increase the numbers. I do not know if this was an ego need, that may be part of it, but I also feel certain of a theological mandate that the Gospel be shared and that outsiders be included. If those things were happening it would follow that the church would either grow, or shrink, and begin to include different people. As it was, the church was pretty much the same people as ten years prior and without much change from week-to-week, year-to-year.

My seminary education did not prepare me to seek outsiders or be missional. I had to learn these things on my own. I attended seminars, read books, and began practicing those things I felt to be consistent with my own ecclesiology and theology. Along the way, I became acutely aware that my church was a closed community. It was a social system that had reached its social capacity and that no matter how missional, friendly, and welcoming it became, it just did not have the capacity for more people — *there was no room in the inn*. Theologically speaking, when the system has no more capacity to include the outsider, where do we find Christ? When our systems exclude others, does it not also then exclude Christ?

The lessons I was learning from my seminars and books taught me that I needed to build more opportunities for community, (I would say, more physical in the system). One of the ways to do that was to add physical space. Make sure there is enough parking and seats in the sanctuary. Another way to do this was to add a worship service. Therefore, I spent a year proposing and designing a second service. We added the service and it went rather smoothly.

What happened was, we increased our membership slightly, but our worship attendance went up by 22%. People previously inactive started coming to worship and found they had a place in the church that I believe had previously—unconsciously—excluded them. The new service created new physiological, but, more importantly, more sociological space. The new service allowed for new sociological space, space that had previously been taken up by others.

I also recall during those days meeting some young boys in the community at the local bank. They were standing in line with me and I asked them if they had a church. They said “no” and since they were of confirmation age, I invited them to come to confirmation on Wednesday nights. Right after that conversation, I remember thinking, “They won’t be welcome there.” All those kids in confirmation grew up together in the church and they know each other like brothers and sisters. If these boys do show up, they will feel completely alienated. How would we make a place for them in our church? I realized that for them there was no room in the inn. There was no sociological space for them. As a pastor of a 450-member church with 160 in weekly worship, I did not have the time or energy to create more space for these boys. They were left to fend for themselves, to find salvation on their own without the aide of my congregation.

Because of my missional practices and passion and due to some modest success at building up membership and worship attendance in a declining rural community, I was identified as a potential mission developer. I was screened, affirmed, and took a call to start a new church in Minnesota. After some initial training, I began knocking on doors and started a church with two worship services. The church organized after two years and has since reached a plateau of 135 at worship. The amazing thing I experience during this time was how quickly this dynamic of the church becoming a closed social system was at work. As I gathered worshippers, they would get to know each other and form friendships and bonds. As those bonds grew stronger these people would form into social groups that would slowly

become exclusive. People visiting the church began to be ignored while those who knew each other would move into their circles of comfort. I realized it was up to me to work at keeping people open to new members and to create new opportunities for those newer to the church. What happened, however, is that I became stretched beyond my capacity by the demands of pastoral parish ministry and was unable to effectively attend to all the demands on my time.

The gurus of church growth tell me my congregation and my leadership capacity would hit a ceiling at about 150² in weekly worship, and at that point, in order for the church to grow, some radical changes would need to take place, including changes in leadership style and infrastructure. Essentially, what is called for is radically increasing capacity for sociological and physical space and moving through a paradigm shift for members of the congregation to accept pastoral care and leadership from lay leaders as well as pastors. The change, growing from a pastoral-size church to a program-size church, is notoriously difficult because of the extensive ecclesiological changes it calls for. Roy Oswald says the transition is hard because of what is lost.

Clergy consider a congregation's transition from pastoral to program size the most difficult. One can expect enormous resistance on the part of pastoral church as it flirts with becoming a program church. Many churches make an unconscious choice not to make the transition and keep hovering around the level of 150 active members. The two lost treasured features of a pastoral church that will be lost if it becomes a program church are ready access to their religious leader and the feeling of oneness as a church family, where everyone knows everyone else and the church can function as a single cell community.³

² The numbers for plateau vary. Arlin Rathauge was the first to identify numerical plateaus and identified church typologies based on size categories: The family size, 0-50 weekly worshippers; Pastoral size, 51-150 weekly worship size; Program size, 151-400; and Corporate size 410-1000. Most church researchers agree with the size categories, but the numbers may vary, particularly when it comes to the difference between pastoral size and program size. Alice Mann, who writes extensively for the Alban Institute on this issue, argues effectively that that the pastoral size can be grow as high as 250 before transitioning to program size. The size category relates more to the structural capacity and leadership practices than to exact numbers.

³ Roy M. Oswald, *Making Your Church More Inviting: A Step-by-Step Guide for in-Church Training* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1992), 52.

For the new mission church, this maximum attendance capacity number may be slightly lower than 150 because of extra stress and demands on the pastor. Two colleagues of mine, both mission developers, say they are experiencing this growth ceiling. Both are currently stuck at worshipping at 130 per week. This could be due to the lack of established systems and supports. No matter what they do, they tell me, the church does not grow. They bring in more people but lose just as many out the back door. The capacity in the system is not there and they have reached their individual limitations to make a difference without help, or a change in church dynamics and structure.

As earlier stated, church growth, experts say the maximum number of people a solo pastor can attend to faithfully is between 150 and 250 people in worship each week. If the church grows beyond this, the capacity of the system is exceeded and the stress on the system works against further growth. A system in stress seeks homeostasis (to live within its means and capabilities). Unless some dramatic and significant changes happen to allow for greater capacity, the congregation may for awhile, with great and draining energy, be able to extend its capacity, but will eventually be reduced to the size its sociological structures will allow. Unseen forces of homeostasis work to reduce the congregation to the inherent social capacities. To solve the problem, the congregation must make some difficult choices. It must come to terms with its size limitation and learn to accept the size it will always be and consequently spend energies in other areas of mission, or make the choice to grow which means a great deal of change. Congregations that decide to be content with size need to ask, what of mission?—particularly in areas of population growth. Do we have any obligation to accommodate the outsider? At what expense to us? Congregations that feel called to grow must consider carefully the cost and build in all kinds of new capacities for social systems and leadership opportunities to allow for outsider assimilation. The one choice requires hanging on to the status quo; the other means letting it go.

Research Topic

For this research, I originally intended to find five churches in the Minneapolis Area Synod of the ELCA that had grown beyond 250 per week in average worship attendance and compare them with five churches that have been plateaued between 150 and 250 in average Sunday worship attendance. After investigating the synod church records for the last seven years however, I was surprised to find not a single example of a congregation that had grown through this particular plateau (with the exception of one which was due to a merger and not the growth of a congregation). I was genuinely surprised by this because, having worked in the synod for the last seven years and having served on the Synod's Mission Table and Synod Council, I was certain there were a number of congregations attending to the issue of growing their congregations.⁴ To find that none has been successful in a region of high population growth and high denominational familiarity and affiliation is stunning. Church growth researchers have studied this issue and many books have been written about how to break these size barriers, and yet not one church in the study area has managed to do so. Why? Are these churches trying to grow? If so, what is stopping them? What are they trying? What isn't working?

One of the approaches that may be helpful in understanding the challenges of congregational mission and leadership is through the perspective of systems theory. Systems

⁴ I must make the distinction here what is meant by growing the congregation. Since the church growth movement was initiated in 1955 by Donald McGraven, the father of the conservative evangelical church movement, the meaning of the term "church growth" has been debated. Are we simply talking about growth in numbers or are there qualitative measures that need to be taken into account? One could argue that a church proclaiming the Gospel in its purity would not grow, but shrink due to the radical nature of the Gospel and its challenge. We cannot allow ourselves to think of numbers as the only reliable measure. Having said that, and for the context of this study, church growth is measured in numbers because the numbers represent people, and I am interested in studying people and their relationship with the church. For the sake of providing opportunities for people to participate in the life of the church, and when addressing the issue of sociological space and systems capacity, I know of no other way to measure. I am working from the assumption that when a congregation in an area of high Christian and/or spiritual affiliation and in an area of high populations growth, where the congregation attends to the spiritual nurture of individuals, the congregation will tend to grow. When growth is not apparent, I am suggesting one of the primary issues may be a lack of sociological space and exclusivity. I acknowledge there are other important measures of growth besides numerical.

theory is useful for understanding and analyzing the dynamics and health of just about everything in creation. When applied to congregations, systems theory helps us to see the layered complexity of congregations, and indeed even the limitations of our understanding of them. Mary Jo Hatch in her discussion of systems theory in her book, *Organization Theory*, makes it clear that a system “can never be fully understood merely by analyzing its parts, nor even by reassembling them,”⁵ nonetheless a systems approach is an effective way to understand the whole, keeping in mind “. . . you must also be willing to transcend the view of the individual parts to encounter the entire system at its own level of complexity.”⁶ Furthermore, because systems are layered and because social organizations are systems whose complexity supersedes the human individual as a system, we can never really apprehend and comprehend them fully. It can be compared with an animal system (such as a dog) trying to understand a human system (such as a person). There simply isn't the capacity to comprehend it fully. “Remember . . . theories of organization based solely on models of lower level systems will always be blind to the uniqueness that the higher level system manifests.”⁷ This helps explain why social systems are so difficult to comprehend completely and why our studies of them will always have serious limitation. However, understanding the congregation from a systems perspective can help leaders better understand the issues of size plateau and make better-informed decisions about mission, leadership and growth of the congregation.

This study will attempt to understand at least one dynamic at work in complex social systems, namely the plateaued congregation. I will examine congregations in the Minneapolis

⁵ Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that have plateaued at an average year-around attendance at worship between 125 and 250 per week in worship over the last fifteen years from 1990 to 2005. Using a three-phase sequential mixed methods exploratory approach—QUAL/QUAN/QUAL—I examine some of the reasons why Lutheran congregations in the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod worshipping between 125 to 250 average Sunday worship attendance have not grown beyond an average of worshipping 250 people per week. This research will explore for common themes of system stress, social and leadership capacities, and the dynamics of homeostasis, which would support a systems theory perspective on growth capacity. The study borrows from leaders in the field of church plateau issues to identify congregational size capacity issues. Those issues have to do with two main areas, physical space (room for parking, room in the sanctuary, classroom space), but with more focus and attention to the second area, sociological space and leadership development. In what ways have potential-to-grow congregations created sociological space and developed ministry leaders in their churches?

I do not suggest that church growth is the ultimate goal of ministry or ecclesiology, but I would argue that making room in the inn—that when someone comes to a church looking for a place and does not find it because the inn is full—should be of primary concern for every Christian community of faith. If we attend to making room for the outsider, I imagine there would be growth—at least in some cases! The final measure of faithfulness is not numbers, but rather, how do we treat the stranger in our midst? Moreover, if we make room for strangers faithfully, aren't we likely we will experience some numerical growth?

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Matt 13:31-32)⁸

⁸ All Biblical references in this thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Significance of the Research

This study is attempts to understand what is going on in ELCA Lutheran congregations in the Minneapolis Area Synod and by implication other mainline congregations that tend to plateau. Having served for seven years in the synod, in an area of the country where ELCA Lutheran adherence is highest per capita in the country, and with all that we are learning about congregational growth, why are none of our congregations growing beyond certain sizes? What is going on here?

This is an important topic for the church because the issue of faithfulness is at stake. If the congregation worships and gives and cares for its members, but does not make room for the stranger, it does good things, but is it doing the most important thing God wants done? When the congregation becomes a closed exclusive social system, doesn't it fall victim to sin and becomes dysfunctional and self-centered?

This study will help us understand better the complexity of human organizations and better appreciate the systemic issues of congregational growth that are at work in human social systems. With this understanding, we can better inform and lead congregations in mission.

If our congregations have reached their capacity for member assimilation, what does that mean? Do we work to increase those capacities, growing ever larger? Alternatively, do we create new congregations once capacities are reached as a faithful response to create space at the table of Grace, to allow for equal participation in the life of the church? These are questions of primary concern for the church.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis is this: plateaued congregations located in areas of growing population may be systems with limited social capacity. When the sociological capacity of a

congregation has been reached, a new ecclesiology, new styles of leadership and new opportunities for participation must be created or growth is limited by the existing structures in place. Those limiting structures prevent growth from happening, excluding outsiders from participation. Congregations that reach their system capacity and reform themselves to allow for growth can grow, so long as there are environmental opportunities for such growth. Congregations that have potential for growth, but do not attend to systemic capacities for growth tend to become self serving, closed communities.

Key Terms

- Congregational growth: the measure of increased participation in the life of the church through membership, worship attendance, and levels of involvement.
- Church vitality: the measure of enthusiasm and participation in the programs and activities of a church.
- *Missio Dei*: God works out all things toward fulfilling a sovereign plan. This is seen through the mission of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In God's mercy and love towards us, God delays judgment until the gospel is preached to the ends of the earth. To this end, God allows us to participate in the redemptive work in the created world. It is this work gives us our total identity as a Church.
- Systems theory: Systems Theory focuses on complexity and interdependence of relationships. A system is composed of regularly interacting or interdependent groups of activities/parts that form the emergent whole.
- Homeostasis: the term is most often used in the sense of biological homeostasis. Multicellular organisms require a homeostatic internal environment, in order to live; many environmentalists believe this principle also applies to the external environment. Many ecological, biological, and social systems are homeostatic. They

oppose change to maintain equilibrium. If the system does not succeed in reestablishing its balance, it may ultimately lead the system to stop functioning.

- **Organizational Theory:** a distinct field of academic study which takes as its subject organizations, examining them using the methods of economics, sociology, political science, anthropology, and psychology.
- **Missional Ecclesiology:** based on the teachings of Jesus, the church identifies itself with the reign of God in Christ as its center and is guided by the Holy Spirit to be the dynamic presence of God's redemptive power confronting the forces of evil and restoring life to its fullness.⁹ This view of the church is outwardly focused away from itself into the world, claiming more and more for the kingdom of God.
- **Church Growth Theory:** that science which investigates the planting, multiplication, function, and health of churches as they relate specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19-22). It strives to combine theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insights of contemporary social and behavioral sciences based on the foundational work of Donald McGavran, with focus on the homogeneous principle as reflected from his missionary ministry in India.¹⁰
- **Salvation history:** The belief that God works through history and all things to bring salvation, healing, and wholeness to every part of creation.

⁹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

¹⁰ C. Peter Wagner, "Recent Developments in Church Growth Understanding," *Review and Expositor* 77 (1980): 509.

Key Questions

Is there a clear, key connection between congregational growth and vitality when it comes to missional ecclesiology? In other words, will a congregation grow or become vital without a theology that is primarily missional in nature?

Are pastors seeking to grow the congregation, or are they content with maintaining the current ministry? If they are seeking to grow the church numerically, what is happening? Why is it not working? Are pastors serving in congregations of 125 to 250 in worship frustrated with the inability to grow beyond that number? What in particular have pastors/leaders done to create growth beyond a typical growth boundary?

What are the specific challenges faced in the human Christian community when it comes to allowing for growth besides physical limitations? What are the internal dynamics working against growth despite efforts of the congregation to grow? How have pastors making this transition dealt with these dynamics in their settings? What might this mean for the local and larger church regarding missional strategy? How do human communities become 'closed communities' and what can we do to change that?

How can we maintain a missional ecclesiology over the long-term life of a congregation when there are natural tendencies to internalize ministry? What happens when we do not?

Ethical Considerations

During this study, I employ qualitative interview with pastors of local churches. I have assured them a high degree of confidentiality as needed to allow for frank answers. No names or names of congregations will be used in the reporting of results. There could be ways to identify the congregations and pastors studied if one took the time to figure it out, so reports and references to congregations and pastors will be made in the most positive light.

Congregations and pastors have been promised anonymity in the study as well as a copy of findings.

All hard copies of survey data, interview tapes, and transcribed interviews will be stored for a period of five years in the researchers' files and then destroyed. Electronic copies of study materials will be maintained on the researchers' computer indefinitely. All references to pastors and congregations are appropriately obscured and/or deleted on all research materials.

The synodical bishop's office was apprised of the research in advance through an associate to the bishop. The research was done with a sensitivity to the potential influence research can have on a congregation. Research was carefully explained and permissions were obtained from the pastors of participating congregations. Each participating congregation was promised a copy of the final thesis. Interviews with key leaders were done with sensitivity to the potential influence they might have in raising issues of missional leadership and ecclesiology. Questions are not meant to be a critique of the pastor, leadership, or congregational performance, but could be perceived as such. Therefore, care was taken to pose the questions in a non-threatening way with a desire to gather information, while impacting the system as little as possible.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ever since Dean Kelley wrote his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* in 1972, and ever since the dominant mainline churches began to decline in the 1960's, and while evangelical and nondenominational churches experienced great growth, the question of why and how churches grow has been greatly studied and debated among religious researchers. This period of study and debate is paralleled by what is known as the Church Growth Movement (CGM) that has also brought a great deal of attention to these issues. Authors and scholars Hoge and Roozen responded to Kelley's assertions with a well-documented and thorough study of congregations, including the question of church growth, in their book *Understanding Church Growth and Decline*. In this book, the question of *strictness* as a factor for growth is challenged, and other factors for growth and decline identified.

Much of the subsequent literature on church growth has been based on the study of growing churches to generalize what they have in common. Other studies have been done to compare growing churches with declining ones in order to reveal principles that either encourage growth or discourage it. Theologians and academics have sought to enter into the conversation by asking the probing questions around ecclesiology and missiology which have to do with faithfulness—what of the church growth movement is faithful to Christ and the

missio Dei? Theologians, scholars, and authors such as Craig Van Gelder,¹ David Bosch,² and Darrell Guder³ continue to push the question of the nature of the church, Christian practice, faithfulness in the midst of the church growth movement—what it means to be remain faithful in a changing world, in a changing church.

Among those who wrestle with the issues of mission, ecclesiology, and church growth are persons who raise the question of growth itself and what it means. Peter Wagner indicated the priority should be on numerical growth and argued that a correlation exists between congregational health and numerical growth.

Church health and church growth are presumed to be closely associated. If a church is fully healthy, it will grow. Conversely, if a church is not growing in membership, there is probably something wrong with its health.⁴

Conversely, Robert Evans argues in the same book,

What God requires of the church is not growth, but faithfulness . . . Faithfulness to God is the central mark of Christian commitment. It is lived out in love of God and neighbor . . . God's demand of faithfulness carries no guarantee for growth, health, prosperity, or even temporal survival.⁵

One interesting insight to this particular debate comes from a doctoral thesis presented to the faculty of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary that studied the functioning of the local congregation through an open systems approach. James Robert Fuller

¹ Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

² David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series; No. 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

³ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, The Gospel and Our Culture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998).

⁴ Peter Wagner, "Church Growth Research: The Paradigm and Its Application," in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*, ed. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 270.

⁵ Robert A. Evans, "Recovering the Church's Transforming Middle: Theological Reflections on the Balance Between Faithfulness and Effectiveness," in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline: 1950-1978*, ed. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979), 291-292.

observed a fascinating distinction between congregations when measuring for viability and vitality.

The level of recruitment activity is the most powerful predictor of morale in evangelical congregations, while an open, democratic authority structure has the greatest influence on morale in mainline congregations. Additionally, the unidimensional factor of numerical growth of membership may indeed summarize the largest predictor of viability of an evangelical congregation, but it fails to account for the ongoing viability of its mainline counterpart.⁶

This observation makes an important distinction about the value of numerical church growth and member recruitment between evangelical and mainline congregations, and why numerical growth is a point of contention in either tradition. In evangelical traditions it is closely tied with identity, value, morale, self-worth, and viability—what drives the mission. In mainline traditions it is not regarded as vital but incidental, if even that. For mainline congregations numerical growth is not a pressing need for identity or morale, nor is it a motivating factor as it is for the evangelical tradition.

From a systems perspective it is important to consider another observation made by Fuller in his 1987 dissertation, and that is the distinction between an open and closed system. Mary Jo Hatch discusses this distinction in *Organization Theory*,⁷ stating that an organization is an open system that relates to and is dependent upon its environment and available resources. The organization must be sensitive and responsive to the environment or else it risks survival. Fuller made the observation in his dissertation that congregations with a high degree of environmental involvement scored consistently higher in measures of both morale

⁶ James Robert Fuller, "Evaluating the Functioning of the Local Congregation through an Open Systems Approach" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), 166-167.

⁷ Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*, 34-41.

and viability, suggesting a connection between environmental engagement and organizational vitality.⁸

From a systems perspective the concern for viability and vitality has a lot to do with the matter of open and closed systems. Congregational vitality requires an open system, where a congregation engages the environment. Congregations are open systems, ideally, but can become closed systems, less engaged and less responsive to the environment. When this happens, the system tends to run down. That is, its differentiated structures tend to move toward dissolution as the elements composing them become arranged in random disorder. A closed system is unable to import energy from its environment. Without importation of energy, closed systems eventually reach a state where there is no organization, just randomness or some other variant of chaos.⁹

Gary McIntosh, in his book *Staff Your Church for Growth*,¹⁰ says that over the life of a congregation energy is spent progressively in these six areas:

1. Find New People.
2. Keep New People.
3. Celebrate With People.
4. Educate The People.
5. Oversee The People.
6. Care for People.

What typically happens in a congregation is that when it gets full enough all the energy of the staff gets spent on the last three areas of ministry and the first three areas lose

⁸ Fuller, "Evaluating the Functioning of the Local Congregation through an Open Systems Approach," 156.

⁹ Robert L. Sutherland, *Engineering Systems Analysis* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1958).

¹⁰ Gary McIntosh, *Staff Your Church for Growth: Building Team Ministry in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000).

their primacy. Consequently, the congregation becomes self-centered and all the energy available is spent on the needs of existing members. McIntosh argues that congregations should attempt to staff across the entire spectrum over the life of the church in order to keep the church vital and viable. Such an approach would keep the system engaged in its environment and therefore remain an open system, instead of turning inward, becoming self-serving and closed to the outside world.

The purpose of this paper is to examine this one aspect of church growth and development that is the phenomenon of congregational size plateaus and transitions. A Catholic priest made the interesting observation in 1961 that faith communities seem to peak at the size of 153. Playing off the text from John 21:11, Father Tyler suggests (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) that the 153 fish caught by the disciples might have something to do with the maximum size of a congregation. He makes this observation reflecting on why it is that Christian communities seem to optimize at around 153.

Why is it that in so many parishes where there is liturgical and missionary reform that it is possible to build up fairly quickly a real Christian community of 153, but there it sticks? Of course you can get more communicants (I regard the weekly number of communicants in the parish registers as utterly meaningless), but you will find that the worshipping and real community which is fellowship of persons remains at 153.¹¹

This is the key question taken up by this paper. What are the dynamics at work that makes congregations plateau around 150 in worship? It is this question of social size phenomenon that is taken up in the book, *The Tipping Point*, where the author refers to it as “the rule of 150.”¹² Based on the “channel capacity” of the human neo-cortex we have the emotional capacity to deeply care for up to 15 people. “At a certain point, at somewhere

¹¹ L. G. Tyler, "One Hundred and Fifty Three," *Theology* 64 (1961): 416.

¹² Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little Brown, 2000), 175.

between 10 and 15 people, we begin to overload . . .”¹³ Our “social channel capacity” is our larger capacity to handle the complexities of larger social groups. Humans, with the largest brain capacity in the animal kingdom, can handle the largest social arrangements. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar has actually worked out an equation for this social capacity based on the size of the neo-cortex and can apply it to all types of primates based on their brain size. If you plug in the neocortex ratio based on brain size for *Homo sapiens* you get, interestingly, the group estimate of 147.8 – or roughly 150. “The figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us.”¹⁴ This number of 150 seems to appear often in primitive hunter-gatherer societies. The same pattern holds true for military organizations, Dunbar says. Then there is the religious group known as the Hutterites, who for hundreds of years have lived in self-sufficient agricultural colonies in Europe and, since the early twentieth century, in North America.

At 150, the Hutterites believe, something happens—something indefinable but very real—that somehow changes the nature of the community overnight. In smaller groups people are a lot closer. They’re knit together, which is very important if you want to be effective and successful at community life. If you get too large you don’t have enough work in common. You don’t have enough things in common, and the you start to become strangers and that close-knit fellowship starts to get lost.¹⁵

They have a strict policy that every time a colony approaches 150, they split it in two and start a new one. Church growth experts have recognized this limitation in social capacities and have argued that to grow larger the church must grow smaller, meaning socially the church must be built around these natural social-sized building blocks of 10-15 people and up

¹³ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

to 150 people. Intentionally creating and managing these sized groups is the key to accommodating for growth in the church. This would help explain how small group ministry has allowed many congregations to grow exceptionally large, by intentionally building in greater social capacity.

One of the first and notable people to take up the issue of church size and size transition is Arlin Rothauge who in 1983 discusses congregation size plateaus and size characteristics his book *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Members Ministry*. He identified the structure, characteristics, relationships, and needs of four congregational sizes: family (up to 50 active members); pastoral (50-150); program (150-350); and corporation (350-500). For each size, the author attempts to answer five questions: (1) What is the basic congregational structure? (2) How does the congregation attract newcomers? (3) How does a newcomer enter the congregation and become a fully-included member? (4) What are the needs of new members? and (5) How might a congregation best meet those needs?

Since the publication of his booklet, numerous other authors have taken up the issue of church size dynamics and size transition issues. These include Carl F. George and Warren Bird's *How to Break Growth Barriers: Capturing Overlooked Opportunities for Church Growth*, Lyle Schaller's *44 Steps Up Off the Plateau*, Alice Mann's *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations*, and *Raising the Roof: Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition*, Gary McIntosh's *One Size Doesn't Fit All*, and Beth Ann Gaede's *Size Transitions in Congregations*.

The question of church size and size transition has been taken up most ardently by the Alban Institute, which has done studies and published many books on the issue of church sizes and church size transition, including many of the above-mentioned authors. Founded in 1974, Alban carries out work in research, training, publishing, consulting, around

congregational growth, relying heavily on new knowledge in the fields of sociology, human relations, and organization development.

In a telephone conversation, Alice Mann of the Alban Institute directed me to consider studies being done by the church of the Nazarene on church size plateau. Charles Crow has written an article related to the issue. In his article *Enduring Cultures of the Laity*, Crow examines church sizes and reflects on the issues of plateau. Crow suggests that there are cultures and paradigms at work in congregations and is possible “certain paradigms impede growth while others are more accommodating of growth.”¹⁶ The paradigm/culture is a set of rules and regulations (written and/or unwritten) that does two things: 1) it establishes or defines boundaries; and 2) it tells you how to behave inside the boundaries in order to be successful.

It appeared to me that each church could be expected to have its own culture, or a patterned set of activities that reflected the groups underlying values. These cultures wouldn't occur randomly. They would occur because the local leaders spent time practicing and rewarding some behavior and values more than others.¹⁷

In describing church sizes, Crow names categories similar to those first developed by Rothauge. Rather than “Family, Pastoral, Program and Corporate,” however, Crow uses the terms Basic Family Church (up to 50 people in worship), Extended Family Church (from 50 to 150 people), Family Owned Enterprise (150 to 350 people) and Corporate Enterprise Church (over 350 per week in worship).¹⁸ These size categories are roughly the same as those of Rothauge and so is much of his description of their dynamics. What Crow does different, however, is to focus more on the role of families and the power of their influence

¹⁶ Charles Crow, “Enduring Cultures of the Laity,” Church of the Nazarene, ANSR Documents by Author, http://www.nazarene.org/ansr/articles/Crow_Charles_97.html (accessed November 2006), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

on the system. Due to the powerful influence of paradigm/culture preserved by stake holding families, these organizational cultures are very stable and resist change. For change to occur, what must be overcome is their (stake holding families) powerful attachment and investment to the existing culture/paradigm. Crow is consistent with other authors when he describes the most difficult transition in congregational growth transitions is after 150 in worship. One reason this transition is made difficult is because the emphasis must move from relationships to structure. This is a hard transition for people to make, as informal structures and relationships are such a high value for churches up to 150 in worship.

For example, churches at one end of the continuum would do their planning, organizing, developing of human resources, budgeting, supervising, and evaluation in informal ways that value relationships above structure. Churches at the other end would carry out the same functions in formal ways that value organization and structure above particular individual relationships.¹⁹

Kenneth Crow, another author from the Church of the Nazarene also wrestles with the conceptual framework of church sizes and congregational church plateaus. In his article, *A Network of Congregations: Congregation Size in the Church of the Nazarene*, he talks about growth barriers, but identifies them as “Choice-Points” as another way to think about these realities. Congregations make “choices” about what size they remain and those choice-points are at the same size points identified by Rothauge.

The conceptual framework of “choice-points” should not be understood to imply that congregations make overt, formal decisions at these points. In fact, most are probably informal decisions that are nevertheless widely accepted and firmly held. Once these decisions are made, congregations appear to cycle up and down within the range allowed by the organizational issues of the choice-point. They tend to effectively prevent or replace losses that would move them below the chosen range and resist additions that would move them significantly above that range.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Kenneth Crow, “A Network of Congregations: Congregation Size in the Church of the Nazarene,” Research Center, Church of the Nazarene, October 5, 2004, <http://media.premierstudios.com/Nazarene/docs/NetworkCongregations.pdf> (accessed January 2007), 2.

Crow identifies these choice-point trends across several mainline denominations, including the ELCA, demonstrating a trend common to all of them. He argues that when congregations reach these choice-points and choose to remain that size, typically up to 50 and then up to 150, “. . . they tend to hold their choices rather firmly.”²¹

The typology predicts that since congregational cultures tend to be relatively strong, they are more likely to maintain the type of congregation they have chosen than they are to accept either growth or decline that might threaten or change their culture.²²

More to the point of this thesis, Crow suggests that small congregations are hesitant to allow people in and only do so selectively, so long as the nature of the church is not threatened.

While small churches tend to be reluctant to allow new people into their “family,” new converts who are already related to the group will probably be admitted. This includes children of members, both when they are growing up and when they come back to the Lord as young adults. Most small churches have room to add a few more people without reaching a choice-point about changing the nature of the congregation. . . . However, if the mission of the church is to be accomplished, they must be helped not to choose to preserve the “family” nature of the church at the cost of refusing to carry out the great commission.²³

Crow is clear to say that while members’ decisions made around size “choice-points” are probably most often not fully conscious, carefully considered, formal decisions, they are nevertheless strong and emotional. Leaders of such a paradigm/culture might do well, Crow argues, to consider leading the congregation help start a new church rather than face the battle of trying to increase the size of the existing church.²⁴

In a review of articles on church size transition one finds many of the Alban Institute authors producing most of the literature today. In a review of dissertations over the last 20

²¹ Ibid., 9.

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid., 20.

²⁴ Ibid., 21.

years there are a handful of that have been done related to the issue of church size transition. Brian Schofield-Bodt wrote a thesis in 1994 using education as a method for overcoming barriers to growth in a local church.²⁵ He argued that an effective transition from a pastoral size church to a program size church could be obtained through "...an informed, educated leadership." Borrowing heavily from the teachings of the Alban Institute, Shoefield-Bold sought to empower church transition and growth. Using the church size typologies of Rothauge as a basis for understanding church dynamics and educational events, the author educates church leaders to move them to a program church understanding. The final evaluation showed a modest success in moving the congregation toward a program church metaphor; however, church leadership had clearly made the transition. This was the only thesis found that tested directly the phenomenon of church size transition as defined by Rothauge.

Another study by Carl Green at Gonzaga University, dealt with exploring the experiences of pastoral leadership and issues related to congregation size and growth with specific attention to (1) the congregational characteristics typically associated with varying size, (2) the congregational life cycle stage, and (3) the congregational cultural characteristics.²⁶ Green studied 37 protestant pastors from 16 denominations in different size categories (roughly approximating the Rothauge categories) to help congregations work through the issues related to church growth. The study was too broad and inconclusive and created more questions than answers.

²⁵ Brian Russell Schofield-Bodt, "Educating for the Transition from a Pastoral to a Program Church: A Leadership Development Model for the Huntington United Methodist Church" (D.Min. thesis, Hartford Seminary, 1994).

²⁶ Carl C. Green, "Pastoral Leadership, Congregational Size, Life Cycle Stage, and Church Culture: A Grounded Theory Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., Gonzaga University, 2005).

Christine Nelson wrote her thesis in 1998 at Hartford Seminary attempting to study middle-sized congregations to identify peculiarities, organizational theory, and systems theory, along with theories of change to identify a helpful process of change. Again, there were no direct connections to the Rothauge size and transition issues, but the study did identify six barriers to organizational change: (1) Failure to give up old concepts, systems or behaviors, (2) Failure by leadership to set the non-anxious, flexible tone necessary for change, (3) Fear of conflict, (4) Lack of strategic plan, (5) Lack of objective forms of evaluation with measurable goals, and (6) No outsider support and encouragement.²⁷ The study does not relate directly to my thesis, but does serve to point out the myriad of issues facing congregations attempting to grow and change.

Teresa Stovall wrote her thesis in 2001 at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, seeking to identify the differences between growing, declining, plateaued, and erratic growth churches in Texas.²⁸ Her categories again do not parallel the ones I use, but there are some useful insights from her work in that I am seek to identify, specifically issues related to church change, growth, and transition. She studied 2,662 Southern Baptist Churches and classified them according to her four categories. Data was analyzed as follows: The statistical procedures used Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The MANOVA was used to assess whether an overall difference was found between the groups, and then the separate univariate tests, ANOVA, were employed to address the individual issues for each variable. The MANOVA procedure found statistically significant differences between the four groups. Her conclusion is

²⁷ Christine L. Nelson, "Saying Yes to a Future Shaped by God: Change and the Experiences of a Middle-Sized Church, Faith United Church of Christ, Allentown Pennsylvania" (D.Min. thesis, Hartford Seminary, 1998).

²⁸ Teresa Hill Stovall, "A Study of the Differences between Growing, Declining, Plateaued, and Erratic Growth Southern Baptist Churches in the State of Texas" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001).

consistent with what many are realizing about the issue of church growth, “The findings of this study continue to emphasize that church growth is a multivariate issue and cannot be accounted for by single cause explanations.”²⁹

The complexity of the issue is certain; the issue of congregational growth is multivariate. As we seek to discover answers we must keep in mind the fact that when studying organizations, we are limited by the fact that any explanation of organizational behavior will always be limited because lower systems such as ourselves (humans) can never fully comprehend the complexity of higher level system (social organizations). As you move to higher levels of the hierarchy, the concept of system dynamics becomes increasingly complex. “Your perspective on organizations is, therefore, relatively unique in your experience of the world. It is one of the few subjects that you can study from the perspective of a participant (that is, a subsystem) and whose complexity supersedes, and often overwhelms, your own.”³⁰

I am not seeking, nor do I expect to find a single causal explanation for congregational growth in my efforts. Nor do I believe one exists. I do, however, believe there is a helpful paradigm for understanding church growth, particularly for understanding plateau, size transition dynamics, and the phenomenon of 153.

Systems Theory

I am fascinated by systems theory. We live in a universe of systems. Everything in the created material realm, from the whole universe, down to smallest known parts of matter, participates in systems at many levels and in many ways. Webster defines a system as a

²⁹ Ibid., 29.

³⁰ Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*, 39.

“regularly interacting or independent group of items forming a unified whole, which is in, or tends to be in, equilibrium.”³¹

General Systems Theory was first put forth by its founder, biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who was concerned with the increasing compartmentalization of science and argued that certain general ideas could have relevance across a broad spectrum of disciplines. In particular, General Systems Theory shows how the most important entities studied by scientists—nuclear particles, atoms, molecules, cells, organs, organisms, ecological communities, groups, organizations, societies, solar systems—are all subsumable under the general rubric of “system.”³²

The three major perspectives of originations are rational system, natural system, and open system. The rational and natural systems perspectives tend to view the organization as a closed system, that is, separate from the environment. The open system on the other hand is seen as open and dependent on the environment. A closed system tends to overemphasize principles of internal organizational functioning with constant failure to develop and understand processes of feedback which are essential to survival. These systems have a tendency toward the pursuit of relatively specific goals and highly formalized social structures. A closed system may include client-oriented service organizations, i.e. a rape-counseling center, alternative schools, or food and producer cooperatives. These systems deny the authority of office, seek to minimize the promulgation of rules and procedures, attempt to eliminate status gradations among participants, and do away with role differentiation and specialization of function. In closed systems, participants share a common interest in the survival of the system and engage in collective activities and structures to this

³¹ *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (1999), s.v. “System.”

³² W. Richard Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 134.

end. Therefore, organizations share with all collectives and focus attention on the behavioral structure.³³

Open systems would be characterized by an assemblage or combination of parts whose relations make them interdependent with their immediate surrounding environment, so that apart from interacting with the environment they cannot survive. Whether a system is open or closed can be determined based on how the boundaries of the system are defined and how they interact with their surroundings.³⁴

It is my intention in this paper to suggest that congregations are ideally called to be open systems, but that due to the nature of human social behavior they tend to become closed systems when they reach certain capacities (around 153) based on leadership (system) structures. In congregational mission and leadership, it is essential to understand what these capacities are, what the dynamics are that work to close a system, and for leaders to know how to enact the appropriate, systematic changes that would allow for the system to remain open and interacting with its environment in a healthy, faithful way.

There has been a great deal of literature written which uses systems thinking in relation to understanding and working with dynamics in congregations. The systems thinking most often applied to congregations comes from the field of Family Systems Theory. Family Systems Theory is a form of General Systems Theory that focuses on the dynamics of human families. This field of study has been especially fruitful for the understanding of how people interact within social systems. Edwin H. Friedman is a primary pioneer in the field of family process in church and synagogue. His book, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in*

³³ Namsoo Hong, Wallid Al-Khatib, Bill Magagna, Andrea McLoughlin, Brenda Coe, "Systems Theory," Systems Theory and Systems Thinking, Penn State University Educational Systems Design, <http://www.ed.psu.edu/insys/ESD/systems/theory/SYSTHEO2.htm> (accessed June 11, 2006).

³⁴ Ibid.

Church and Synagogue, introduced family systems theory to church leadership and transformed how many look at the emotional life of the congregation, practice leadership, pastoral counseling, and deal with stress in the church. Since his book was published in 1985, many others in the field have followed with articles and books of their own.

Some of the literature that draws from systems thinking are Ronald W. Richardson's *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life*, Michael C. Armour and Don Browning's *Systems Sensitive Leadership*, Charles H. Cosgrove and Dennis D. Hatfield's *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights*, R. Paul Steven and Phil Collins' *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership*, and Peter Steinke's *When Congregations Are Stuck*. All of these are excellent books and very useful for understanding ministry and leadership. I was unable, however to locate any author who make a connection between systems thinking and size transition, or systems thinking and mission. I spoke to Peter Steinke on the telephone and he said he was unaware of anyone currently who has applied systems thinking to missiology.

Margaret Wheatley writes most optimistically about quantum physics, self-organizing systems, and chaos theory. This new and exciting perspective on reality provides wonderful insights for understanding congregations and leadership. She states:

In new science, the underlying currents are a movement toward holism, toward understanding the system as a system and giving primary value to the relationships that exist among seemingly discrete parts... When we view systems from this perspective, we enter an entirely new landscape of connections, of phenomena that cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect, and of the constant flux of dynamic process.³⁵

Wheatley tells us we continue to be stuck in a Newtonian, mechanical understanding of the universe, and that if we were to begin seeing what the new science is teaching us we

³⁵ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992), 9.

would act and think in new ways. Rather than attempting to act upon the processes of the church as though we were tinkering with a great machine and instead begin to pay attention to relationships and attend to those, we would bear more fruit.

We need to stop describing tasks and instead facilitate process. We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships, how to nurture growing and evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups, because these are the talents that build strong relationships...What gives power its charge, positive or negative, is the quality of relationships...Those who are open to others and who see others in their fullness create positive energy. Love in organizations then, is the most potent source of power we have available.³⁶

This last quote goes to my thesis, in that it helps explain what happens when church systems become full and closed. A faith community starts out open, loving, concerned with process of new community and relationships, but over time becomes saturated and reaches a systemic capacity and the system begins to close. The plateaued church loses the ability to nurture and build new relationships. Growing churches find ways to keep the system open, engaged with its outer environment, alive to new relationships and capable of creating new systems of relating.

Equilibrium is a condition in which all acting influences are canceled by others, resulting in a stable, balanced, or unchanging system. Equilibrium is the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that a closed system will wear down by giving off energy that cannot be retrieved—it is the end state of an isolated system that has exhausted its capacity for change. At equilibrium, there is nothing left for the system to do. It can produce nothing more. “. . . closed systems overemphasize principles of internal organizational functioning

³⁶ Ibid., 38.

with the consequent failure to develop and understand the processes of feedback which are essential to survival.”³⁷

Open systems, however, have the possibility of continuously importing free energy from the environment. An open system stays viable because it is a constant state of non-equilibrium, keeping the system off balance so that it can change and grow. What are the implications for congregations as systems?

There are several good articles and essays on the subject of systems thinking and church leadership. None yet has talked about the issue of open/closed systems and its potential use for understanding evangelism and mission, but most do write of how a systems perspective is important for understanding the dynamics of a congregation and for the practice of leadership. Rhonda Hanisch and Anne Marie Nuechterlein write beautifully in their 1954 article, *Our Mission and Ministry*, about the importance of leadership self-differentiation. When leadership is not self-differentiated he or she cannot be effective at building right relationships, and for a system to be healthy there needs to be right relationships. Otherwise, the leader becomes a part of and a cause of system dysfunction.

It is a call to self-differentiation: Differentiation means the capacity of a family member (in this case, a follower of Jesus) to define his or her own life’s goals and values apart from the surrounding togetherness pressures, to say “I” when others are demanding “you” and “we.” It includes the capacity to maintain a nonanxious presence in the midst of anxious systems, to take maximum responsibility for one’s own destiny and emotional being.³⁸

Robert Arnott gives a detailed version of how pastoral ministry must now accept and engage in systems management and administration as a main part of their work.

“Management is necessarily concerned with all of the interests of the organization and must

³⁷ Howard Aldrich, and Anant R. Negandhi, *Conflict and Power in Complex Organizations: An Inter-Institutional Perspective* (Kent, OH: Comparative Administration Research Institute of the Center for Business and Economic Research, 1972), 155.

³⁸ Anne Marie Nuechterlein and Rhonda R. Hanisch, "Our Mission and Ministry: Differentiated and Connected Identity and Relationships," *Pastoral Psychology* 38, (1990), 208-209.

deal with all of the factors which are involved in maintaining the health and vitality of the system.”³⁹ Arnott goes on to say systems theory gives us a new model for synthesis that will help us see the church as a living organism. By doing so we are better able to attend to goals appropriate to the life of a congregation.

Barbara Wheeler writes that while “systems” has become a predominant image of the church, it has a down side too. She discusses the historical images of the church and brings us to the image of the church as an organization, warning that it can lead us to thinking an organization that can be construed as a “mechanical system which can be improved by careful attention to its dynamics—a term from physics—or to the effectiveness of its program, another way of talking about productivity or output.”⁴⁰ She argues we need to remember the image of system is “only a metaphor.”

Paul Stevens stands in contrast to Wheeler and argues there is a strong congruency between systems theory, Biblical theology, and pastoral leadership, and that systems theory is more than just an analogy, or a metaphor, but an actuality.

Both the theological themes—family, body, and bride—and systems theory elucidate the social complex of the church’s unity...how one leads a system: not by direct action and initiative as in the running of a machine, nor simply by nurturing the parts as in the leading of groups...the leader is a visionary person continuously clarifying the purpose of the system, interpreting changes in the system, and monitoring the influences acting upon the system...systems theory is the most consonant with the theological character of the church.⁴¹

And,

Scripture reveals the reality of an infinite, personal, immanent, and transcendent God who speaks both within the system and to the system. Further, the bible makes the

³⁹ Robert J. Arnott, "Systems Theory and Pastoral Administration," *Christian Ministry* 3 (1972): 15.

⁴⁰ Barbara G. Wheeler, "What Kind of Leadership for Tomorrow's Churches," *Word & World* 13, no. 1 (1993): 36.

⁴¹ R. Paul Stevens, "Analogy or Homology? An Investigation of the Congruency of Systems Theory and Biblical Theology in Pastoral Leadership," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 22 (1994): 178.

audacious claim that there is a place outside the system (the Kingdom of God) and a lever that can move the world—a wooden cross with its fulcrum in heaven.⁴²

One of the most promising writers I found combining systems theory and theology is James E. Huchingson. Huchingson writes from the philosophical, cosmological, metaphysical perspective. Some of his articles are *Organization and Process: Systems Philosophy and Whiteheadian Metaphysics*, *The World as God's Body: A Systems View*, *Reflections On A Theory of The Earth, Quo Vadis, Systems Thought?* and *Chaos and God's Abundance: An Ontology of Variety in the Divine Life*.

Martha Rogers uses systems theory in a clinical, practical, and theological way, connecting systems theory, biblical themes and characters, to human social dynamics. She has written the following articles: *The Apostle Paul: Problem Formation and Problem Resolution from a Systems Perspective*, *A Systems View of Jesus as Change Agent*, and *Some Bible Families Examined From a Systems Perspective*.

A survey of dissertations reveals a surprisingly few number of more recent studies done in the area of systems theory. Robert Shoemsmith wrote a thesis at Hartford Seminary in 1998 using systems theory to (a) bring a more holistic understanding and approach to congregation issues; and (b) develop a systems model for his church by participation in a systems analysis workshop. Systems concepts were introduced through presentations and workshops, and the results were deepened commitment, and interest and involvement in the local church.⁴³

Richard Carter wrote a thesis at Drew University in 1991 called, "Developing An 'Open Family' System in the United Church (Tennessee)." In his thesis, he examines the impact of family systems theory on the ministry of an individual congregation. The attempt

⁴² Ibid., 180.

⁴³ Robert Paul Shoemsmith, "Congregational Systems" (D.Min. thesis, Hartford Seminary, 1998).

was to alter the functioning of the congregation from a random family system to an open family system. The author argues systems theory is an organic way of thinking that joins and unifies families, and that this is a spiritual process. A key finding was the means by which a leader can intervene in the system, and the limits and possibilities of intervention. It focuses attention on the process of leadership itself, and the leader by defining his or her values through self-differentiation and by remaining connected to the emotional system is better able to lead and influence the healthy functioning of a system.⁴⁴

Susan Crandall-Tobey writes in her 1997 thesis from Gonzaga University about generationally dysfunctional churches through the lens of family systems theory.⁴⁵ She focuses on the concept of homeostasis and the role of tradition that perpetuates dysfunction and lack of growth. The study examines four protestant churches of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition identified as problem congregations. These congregational profiles were analyzed through Bowen's theory⁴⁶ and compared for similarities and differences. Thirty-six themes result from the study along with appropriate recommendations.

Conclusion

While the literature and studies of church size transition and systems theory are readily available and diverse, I could find no single example of literature where the two areas of study have been view together as a possible paradigm for imagining church growth

⁴⁴ Richard Boyd Carter, "Developing An 'Open Family' System in the United Church" (D.Min. thesis, Drew University, 1991).

⁴⁵ Susan Ann Crandall-Tobey, "A Phenomenological Exploration of Generationally Dysfunctional Churches (Family Systems Theory)" (Ph.D. diss., Gonzaga University, 1997).

⁴⁶ Beginning in the 1950s, Murray Bowen, M.D., developed a systems theory of the family rooted in the following eight concepts: Differentiation of Self; Nuclear Family Emotional System; Triangles; Family Projection Process; Multigenerational Transmission Process; Emotional Cutoff; Sibling Position; and Societal Emotional Process.

dynamics and issues. This leads me to believe that I might actually be bringing an interesting new perspective to the discussion. We shall see.

In my conversation with Peter Steinke, he told me my idea was good, but the challenge will be in how to reliably test it. That, he said, has been the challenge for everyone who tries to engage in systems theory research.

The methodology I use will not be unique in that it follows the same pattern as many church growth studies. I examine plateaued congregations for evidence of growth barrier issues, looking specifically from a systems perspectives for signs of systemic growth limitations. What is unique in this study, is not trying to elucidate principles of growth and non-growth, which has already been done, but rather understanding growth and non-growth from a systems perspective and how that perspective might be helpful as we struggle with ecclesiology, mission, and leadership in a rapidly changing world.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Maybe it is the time of year, three days after Christmas that I write this that influences my theological perspective, but the birth of Christ in a stable provides the perfect theological metaphor for my thesis. When Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, the town is packed with visitors from afar and the only place left for a pregnant woman and her husband is out in the barn. It is here in the margin of society that the savior of the world arrives. He comes in the dark of night, through a poor unmarried peasant woman in a barn. His arrival is announced by the angels to the most unreliable, marginal characters possible, the shepherds. The rest of the world misses this cosmic event because it happens in a most unexpected place, in a most unexpected way. God comes into the world, not at the center, but at its furthest marginal edges.

The mission of God through Jesus Christ was and is an outreach also to the edges—to those in the margins, to the outcast, the unclean, unacceptable, even to the gentiles. Jesus, throughout his ministry and today, continues to move out from the center of society to the outer edges, to the lowest common denominator. He rejects attempts to move him to the center. He continues to maintain his focus on the work at hand to the least and lowest, to the margins, wherever they might be found.

The call of Christianity is a call to death of the self and of the will. The individual gives up his or her life and surrenders what is left to be used by God. The church is a society, a fellowship, a living body of believers who have given their lives over to be used by God for

reaching the unsaved through proclaiming the Gospel. Andrew Kirk, writing for the World Council of Churches, echoes this sentiment: “The church is by nature missionary to the extent that, if it ceases to be missionary, it has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased being the church. Mission belongs to the very being of the church.”¹

Each of the four Gospels concludes with Jesus giving a clear mission to the disciples. The whole point and purpose of his life, death, and resurrection was to save our lives and that we would in turn give our lives as he did to save others. If the church is not organized around this central truth then the church will, as Kirk says, cease to be the church.

Michael Goheen, writing about Leslie Newbigin’s missional theology, talks a great deal about how the church has failed to be a missional body (thus failing to be the church). Newbigin cites several reasons the church is failing, including (1) the domestication of the church; (2) the fact, value split; (3) church as a self-preserving, self-serving body; (4) a separate understanding of church and mission; (5) the privatization of faith; and (6) the failure of the church to be a summoning community.²

Johannes Blauw in his book, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, takes us back to the beginning in his survey of the biblical theology of mission. In his writing, he does not talk about Old Testament missional ecclesiology per se, but he does say that God’s call from the Old Testament through the New Testament has been a call to mission—“Go to all nations.” The original call begins with Abraham to bless all the nations and is brought to fulfillment in Christ and carried out by the followers of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus is not the beginning of a new church so much as a reformation of an old one. We see the people of

¹ Andrew Kirk, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement, Faith and Order,” a paper presented to the World Council of Churches. Paper; No. 181 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), 15.

² Michael W. Goheen, “As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology” (Ph. D. diss, Boekencentrum, University of Utrecht., 2000), 358, 360, 362, 363, 364.

God, repeatedly in the life of the Israelites, failing to understand and carry out the mission of God. God sends God's Son to make clear what it is God wants. The church is born again.

We see in the Reformation that the Catholic Church, like Judaism in the time of Jesus, bogged down in tradition and practices that no longer reflect the mission of God. Now, here we are today, struggling to figure out this thing called church and mission. The church tends to accumulate practices and traditions that need to die when those practices and traditions no longer serve the mission of going to all nations.

An image that comes to mind is a struggle Jesus had early in his ministry. After healing a man in the synagogue and then healing Simon's mother, Simon's house fills with people. Soon the whole city is there and Jesus heals many of them. That night he goes off to pray. What was he praying about? When they find him, they are insistent. "Everyone is searching for you." Why? Because there is work to do. The ministry is taking off. The whole town is there. Jesus is having great success. However, he tells his followers, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (Mark 1:38).

Jesus was not enticed by this seductive opportunity for success. He never let the crowd, or worship attendance, or membership numbers, influence his mission. In fact, he walks away from such enticement. His ministry is cruciform, not the way of success and glory. All for what? The message. That is, to go out beyond wherever he was to find those who had not heard the news—not to sit in one place and draw people to him so that he could continuously attend to their ongoing needs.

Karl Barth describes mission this way:

Mission, understood now in the narrower—which is, however the real, original sense of the word, means "sending," a sending out into the nations for the purpose of testifying to the gospel...In the "Mission" the Church breaks out, sets out on its road, and takes the step which is necessary to it in the very depths of its being, the step

beyond its own self and also beyond its own environment out into humanity which is entrapped in so many false, willful (sic) and powerless beliefs...³

Like Jesus, the church faces this same constant temptation. Do I go with the numbers? Do I justify myself with success? Do I busy myself with the needs of the 99? It is certainly safest to remain with the 99 and it is the 99 (and ourselves and our leaders) who pressure us to do so. How do we remain faithful to the cruciform calling in the face of such pressure? Christ makes clear the answer. The one is more important than the ninety-nine. How does our ecclesiology and church practice reflect that value?

The church ideally as the body of Christ is intended to have this same focus, drive, and mission as Christ. Yet, the church as divine institution is made up of humans who come with human sinfulness, and therefore does not always maintain this Christ-like focus toward the margins. The church can easily fall prey to human ideals and goals, and its mission can miss the mark. Luther would argue the church *will* miss the mark no matter what direction it chooses, no matter how well intended, because sin is so pervasive. Nevertheless, we should not despair, we should choose a direction and *sin boldly*,⁴ move forward in the confidence that Christ has redeemed us and that God has all things safely in his hands—even our sin.

I began ordained ministry in the spring of 1995. I took my first call to a rural Nebraska congregation of 372 members and 120 per Sunday in annual average worship attendance. During my four years, this church which had been slowly declining in the previous ten years in these same categories began to slowly grow. Membership grew to 450 members and worship attendance climbed to 166 per year in my final year, but there it stopped. Since leaving, that church membership has continued to slowly increase, making up

³ Karl Barth and Helmut Gollwitzer, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (München, Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965).

⁴ From Martin Luther in his letter to Philip Melancton on August 1, 1521.

for the annual losses due to death and transfer. Worship attendance has since dropped and continues to hover between 140 and 150 per Sunday on the average.

It was during these formative years in my first call that I began to wrestle with the idea of mission and evangelism. My seminary and pastoral training prepared me to care for an already existing body of believers, but there was nothing in my formation that equipped me for reaching outside the church. I was torn between the traditional practices and habits of the church, of doing ministry the way I had been prepared to do it, and a sense of calling to reach those who were not of the church.

I began to attend seminars and read resources that addressed growing the church and reaching the unchurched. However, many of these practices were foreign to the Lutheran experience and polity and were met with suspicion and resistance in many cases. I had to move slowly and deliberately to get the people I served to move toward a more missional ecclesiology. This was not been an easy process, but one that calls for death and resurrection. In order to become missional, there needs to be the death, or the dying of what has been done up to that point, so that new priorities and practices can be reborn and established. This always comes through much struggle, and indeed, requires a true dying and rising. It also requires much faith in the God of resurrection.

The reason I find this discussion important is because of the way we do church membership in the ELCA. We claim some five million church members, but of those five million members only about one third are active members. Among the two-thirds inactive members, there exists a false understanding of what it means to be a member of a church body. Many of these people are believers in God but are not believers in the church. They find a false sense of security in knowing they are baptized and that they have a church affiliation, even though they do nothing to maintain that affiliation. John the Baptist warned the Israelites they should be careful about having a false sense of security just because they

were descendants of Abraham—he called them to repent and to be baptized as a sign of sorrow for their sins and a desire to change. We have led generations into believing that baptism is a life insurance policy. If you are baptized and have your name on a church membership list, your eternal soul is secure—no matter if you repent, or surrender your life to God. You can go your own way and do your own thing, because God is going to love you no matter what. Is that the Gospel? I know it is not, but there are too many of our own members operating under this assumption.

This leads me to agree with Russian Orthodox theologian Cabassutio Ioann, Archbishop of Belgorod, and Stairy Oskol of the Russian Orthodox Church who said, writing for the *International Review of Missions*, that one area of mission needs to be directed toward “internal mission”: “...considered to be mission inside the formal boundaries of the Orthodox Church. Here, it addresses those who, although formally ‘in’ the church through their baptism, are not educated or enlightened.”⁵

A missional ecclesiology should have a clear understanding of the distinction between the visible and invisible church. In my congregation, I talk about this distinction in my new member’s class. I tell them that local church membership is not necessary for eternal salvation—the only thing necessary for that is faith in Jesus Christ. Having faith in Christ makes you already a member of the universal, invisible, eternal church of God. One of the marks, or visible signs of that faith, however, is a desire to join with other like-minded believers, to respond to God by giving ones life in service. Membership to the invisible, eternal, universal church is what God gives as an unconditional gift of grace to all who believe. Membership in a local, physical, temporal church is not for our salvation, but is our response to our gift of salvation. The local, visible church is where we share our mutual

⁵ Cabassutio Ioann, “Ecclesiological and Canonical Foundations of Orthodox Mission,” *International Review of Mission* XC, no. 358 (2001): 272.

adoration for God—as commanded by God—and where we offer our service to God and each other—as commanded by God. The local church is a mission station.

We do a disservice to God's people and the Gospel when we allow people to remain on the roles as inactive members of the visible, local church (for what? The sake of numbers?). We should have church records that show just the opposite of what are currently reflected on Lutheran membership roles. Instead of 1,000 total members and an average worship attendance of 350, we should have churches with 350 members and average worship attendance of 1,000. We have it exactly backwards.

A helpful Lutheran category for understanding such a missional ecclesiology would be Martin Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. He drew from Augustine's conception of Two Cities and developed an understanding of a social order that helped clarify the confusion in his day between church and secular authority. Church and state had become enmeshed throughout medieval times and the Middle Ages, since the time of Constantine, and it was part of the Reformation and enlightenment to sort out the confusion between spiritual and secular authority. Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms was instrumental for helping understand how the two realms could function side by side.⁶

By making this distinction, Luther's main intent was to clarify political and spiritual issues. He spoke from a Christendom point of view, from a Christendom time in history, a time when most all in society were considered members of the kingdom of God (although Luther makes a distinction between Christians and *True Christians*) and members of the visible local church. Luther's focus in developing his doctrine of the Two Kingdoms was primarily for political purposes, to help make the distinction between secular and religious authority. Critics have suggested this doctrine has opened the door to secularization of

⁶ Anders Nygren, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," *Ecumenical Review* 2, no. 8 (2002): 301-310.

society and given a free hand to the state, and some have suggested this doctrine is the ultimate root of the National Socialist ideology.⁷ Luther's intention, however, was not to keep the voice of the church out of the state, but rather to keep the state out of the church, a situation that had evolved from the Middle Ages and the time of Constantine. "The whole point of his doctrine of the Two Kingdoms was in fact to prevent the powers of this world from encroaching on the realm of the conscience."⁸ It is only by making this distinction between spiritual and temporal authority that the true authority of the church can be made clear. This issue of the political ramifications of the Two Kingdoms and what it meant for authority and power between church and state was the main issue that Lutheran addresses because this was the problem in his day, not mission or church leadership.

Saint Augustine in the fourth century wrote his famous *The City of God* where he developed a "two cities" understanding of the separate reality of the secular world and the spiritual realm of God.⁹ Augustine wrote in defense of Christianity against those who were blaming Christianity for the fall of Rome. His theology called for an understanding of God that was greater than the goals and aspirations of any one society. He points to another reality beyond secular life. Augustine was writing in defense of Christianity and to help us understand that God's reality is not necessarily ours. "He showed that the Father of Jesus Christ can never be identified with any one society, culture, or state. God directs all history toward a purpose that is beyond human structures, the City of God."¹⁰

Both Luther and Augustine draw from the New Testament for their understanding of the spiritual reality of God's kingdom. The Apostle Paul talks regularly about the

⁷ Ibid., 301.

⁸ Ibid., 302.

⁹ Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950).

¹⁰ Erwin L. Lueker, *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, Rev. ed. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1975), 62.

kingdom of God, about this separate reality in which Christians live: “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13, 14).

This all comes from Jesus himself, of course, whose central image throughout his ministry is “the Kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God is mentioned 113 times in the four Gospels. Matthew uses it the most at 52 times, and John the fewest with only three. However, each of them talks about it in the same way. The point of Jesus’ ministry is to usher in the new kingdom and make it eternally available to all who believe in Jesus Christ. Many of Jesus’ parables are about this new kingdom, and the parables illustrate the difference between the secular and spiritual realities. Many of his parables begin with “The Kingdom of God is like...” then go on to compare and contrast the two different realities.

What Jesus came to do was to rescue people from the earthly kingdom (Kingdom on the left) and transfer them through faith into the heavenly kingdom (Kingdom on the right.). Nevertheless, it does not end there (as so many suppose). A Christian is one born a citizen of the earthly kingdom, but then reborn a citizen of God. This is not just a one-time event, but also a life-long process where one learns to live a new way, a new life. As a citizen of the new kingdom, one discovers a new and different set of values and purposes (“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.” [Rom 12:2]). “And all of us ...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another . . .”) (1 Cor 3:18).

Jesus intended that we not only become and live as citizens of the new kingdom, but that we would gather others into the kingdom as well.

. . . go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, The kingdom of heaven has come near. (Matt 10:6, 7)

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? (Matt 18:12)

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matt 28: 19, 20)

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved . . .” (Mark 16:15, 15)

But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:60)

The kingdom of God was the central image in Jesus' preaching as clearly seen in Mark 1:14-15: “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, *‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’*” The kingdom of God is at the core of his mission.

What did Jesus mean when he spoke of the kingdom of God? He meant, quite simply, the rule of God. The kingdom of God is the reign of God as opposed to the reign of earthly governments and secular leaders. Perhaps this is best understood if it is distinguished from what Jesus did not mean. He was not speaking of a geographical area, such as the Holy Land or the Temple. He was not speaking of a political entity, such as the nation of Israel or Rome or the Jewish leaders. He was not speaking of a group of people, such as His disciples or the church.

On the other hand, Jesus also said that there is a sense in which the kingdom of God had come in His own time. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). He said in an even more explicit way: “But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you” (Luke 11:20). Therefore, the kingdom of God is the rule of God, which God extends over human lives through the ministry of Jesus. It is God’s rule that will be consummated or made complete in the future. In his preaching Jesus regularly invites people to enter the kingdom of God, that is, to open their lives to the

ruling of God. It is important to notice whom he invited. He invited everyone. He did not restrict the invitation to the respectable people, or the religious, or the wealthy or powerful. Jesus included everyone without distinction. He spoke of God sending his servants out to highways and hedges to urge people to come into the kingdom. Jesus even said that it is more difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle (Matt 19:24). He said that the tax collectors and prostitutes would go into the kingdom before the moral and religious people (Matt 21:31). In brief, God is very gracious and loving toward all people and God's kingdom is offered to everyone.

God is graciously giving salvation as a free gift (extending His kingdom) to anyone who will receive it (enter the kingdom) through His Son Jesus Christ. This salvation begins now (the kingdom is in the midst of you) and will be completed in the future (the kingdom will come like a thief in the night). As Paul put it, the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17).

The early church had no difficulty understanding what it meant to live in two kingdoms at once. Since Christians were persecuted, they could easily perceive the distinction of living in God's kingdom while at the same time living in the world, knowing they belonged to the one and were not to be conformed to the other. Confusion about this enters Christianity during the reign of Constantine the Great, who was emperor of Rome during the third century A.D. (280—337). As leader of the Roman world, Constantine saw a great vision and converted to Christianity. He had the pagan symbols of his army changed to Christian symbols and ended the persecution of Christians. He ushered in a new era in Christianity that allowed Christianity to influence the affairs of the state. The Two Kingdoms came together for the first time in Christian history and were intermixed to such a degree that today we are still trying to sort it out. Because of Constantine, the church grew to have worldly power and to exercise such power and authority over earthly kingdoms. Christianity

therefore, became confused. To be a citizen of the Kingdom of God was to be a citizen of the state.¹¹ Citizens of the state were assumed citizens of God's kingdom.

In the fall of Rome, Christianity came under a new persecution and was blamed for the downfall. St. Augustine wrote in defense of Christianity with his *City of God*, arguing the kingdom of God cannot be equated with the purpose of any one state.¹² Throughout the medieval times and middle ages we see the confusion of these two realms as the cause for many abuses by the church. "In the Middle Ages the two were related to one another in terms of a hierarchical system of ends and values, consummated in the supernatural order of the church."¹³ Augustine influenced Luther in that he gave him the distinction with which to separate the two and restore to the gospel its true significance.

By the time we get to the Reformation the church has gone far astray from the intention of God. The selling of indulgences is a fine example of how the Two Kingdoms have led to confusion and abuse. The church was using its assumed spiritual authority to gain material advantages. Using salvation as a lever, the church was pilfering money from innocent people by selling something it did not have to sell.

Luther, of course, is famous for addressing these abuses and his theology is intent on setting them straight. His main emphasis was in clarifying the confusion between church and state. He went beyond Augustine by clarifying the truth of God's kingdom and how it differs from the kingdom of the world—that both are under the sovereignty of God! "He was able to

¹¹ Nygren, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," 305.

¹² Augustine, *The City of God*.

¹³ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 14.

show the Christian how he could assume a meaningful responsibility in the human community without contradicting the categorical commands of Jesus.”¹⁴

Luther did not address the issue of mission per sé in his doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, because that was not the issue of the day. Luther’s main issue was getting the church out of the state and the state out of the church. In his recent article in *The Lutheran*, Frederick W. Baltz talks about the Lutheran Church and lists the many reasons the Lutheran Church has become resistant to evangelism. The first reason (among 12) he cites for why the Lutheran Church has not been effective in evangelism is a theological one. He says the Lutheran church has become “evangelism-resistant” because of the “Great omission.” “The Reformers didn’t address evangelism in the confessional documents that formed us. A society with millions of unbaptized people would have been incomprehensible to them. So they left us no directions.”¹⁵ Evangelism and mission was not an issue in Luther’s day. The issues were church and state.

It has been 400 years since the Reformation and church and state have been thoroughly separated. In fact, the separation has been so complete that the church is no longer in a position of power in matters of the state. Rather than being central, which for so many centuries it was, the church is now on the margins in a position of weakness, at least in matters of government and secular affairs. This is where the church started out, and now 2,000 years later it is where the church finds itself once again. To this, I say amen, the church can now start being the church and not of the world.

Luther’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms is brilliant and insightful. It makes the clear distinction between the two realms without allowing for us leave either behind. God created

¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹⁵ Frederick W. Baltz, "The Evangelical-Resistant Church," *The Lutheran* (2004): 36.

the world and loves it. God sustains the world and maintains peace in it by providing for good government and good laws. However, the visible world is not all there is to reality. There is another reality more important than the visible one. Jesus brings that new kingdom into the world and calls the children of God to become members of it. It is a kingdom totally unlike the kingdom of the world. It is a kingdom of love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Jesus calls us into this kingdom so that we can have a meaningful relationship with God the Father through him. To enter this kingdom we must transfer our allegiance, die to the old, and live to the new.

What does that mean to die to the old? Well, we do not leave it physically of course. What we leave behind are all the values, dreams, and goals—all our earthly pursuits—we die to ourselves (our will and lives) and live for Godly pursuits.

Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 10:39)

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:35)

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26, 27)

Luther would refer to such people as “True Christians.” “To the kingdom of God belong all who believe in Christ and live under Him, for Christ is King and Lord in the kingdom of God. Behold, these need neither sword nor law. And if the entire world were made up of true Christians, there would be no need for ruler, king, lord, sword, or law, for where would be the use of them?”¹⁶

As I said earlier, Luther’s main objective in this doctrine of the Two Kingdoms was to help separate church and state. Since Christianity had prevailed in Luther’s world for so many centuries the doctrine was not developed with mission in mind. It was only developed

¹⁶ Nygren, "Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," 303.

to correct the problem of the day, namely correcting the evils of temporal powers that were usurping divine authority for earthly gain. For the purpose of this thesis, for church and in the context of congregational mission and leadership, and most importantly for kingdom of God, wouldn't it be interesting to speculate as to how Luther might have developed this doctrine for the purpose of mission?

The kingdom of God that Jesus brings into the world was God's original intent for creation. Before the fall in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived in paradise. All was perfect. God's creation was broken when Adam and Eve listened to the serpent who told them there was more for them if they would reject God's instruction and do their own thing. Because of their rejection of God, the human ego (easing God out) created its own world order, a kingdom apart from the one God intended. God has continued to sustain and bless that kingdom, but God has also judged that kingdom—it will not stand. It will eventually be fully transformed by God in the end. This is God's will ("Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" [Matt 6:10]).

Through Jesus Christ God has brought into the broken kingdom (a world that rejected and continues to reject God) God's perfect Kingdom. It is a spiritual reality that is a foretaste of the full kingdom that is to come. These Kingdoms, according to Luther, exist side by side. They both belong to God. God has been overseeing both from the beginning. The kingdom on the left is not the kingdom of the devil, although it is the one the devil has sought to control. "The devil is constantly assailing God's creation to bring it to disorder and destruction. As defense against these assaults, God establishes diverse 'stations' and 'offices.' Rulers, parents, and teachers are all set up as walls and bulwarks against evil. This

is the meaning of Luther's oft-repeated statement that worldly offices are established "against the devil."¹⁷

God meets us in both worlds, not just the one on the right. He meets us in the kingdom on the left through temporal law and in the spiritual world through the Gospel, so that all belongs to God and God's order. All serve the Lord, both secular and religious. Therefore, the Christian life for Luther is not to be drawn out of secular life, but rather to be drawn into it with a completely new set of values and motives. This leads us to a wonderful paradigm for mission.

The kingdom of the fallen world, while blessed and sustained by God, is nevertheless tainted by sin. Human beings, even at their best, are driven by selfish desires. The human cannot free itself from bondage to sin in all its various forms. These forms are generally illustrated by the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. There Jesus was tempted to satisfy his own flesh by turning stones into bread. He was then tempted with the offer of earthly power over all the kingdoms. Finally, he was tempted to put God to a test. These sins represent (1) sins of the flesh; (2) sins of serving the self (ego); and (3) sins of faith (not trusting God). The first relates to all attempts to satisfy spiritual hunger through the flesh. These lead to many kinds of addiction and dysfunction. The irony of this type of sin is that not only is the spiritual appetite not satisfied, but also in pursuing them, one is worse off than before. The second is sins of the ego, which appeals to the human desire to have control over the world and other people and one's own life. This is the temptation of Adam in the garden to become like God, "to know good and evil" (to know what is best for yourself, to choose your own way.) The third relates to our trusting of God. Satan wanted to put God to the test by having him jump off the tower. The serpent in the Garden wanted to create doubt in

¹⁷ Ibid., 304.

Adam's mind about trusting God. "You will not die..." (Gen 3:4) (God is a liar), "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). (God is misleading you and cannot be trusted. Take your own path).

The sins, satisfying the flesh, satisfying the ego, doubting God, in their infinite subtle forms are all the things we are in bondage to in the earthly kingdom. They rule our lives. We are powerless over them. They rule us in ways we are aware and in ways we are not. Jesus comes with power from on high to deliver us from this bondage, to set us free from all these things. He opens the door to the kingdom of God who promises freedom and new life—freedom from all the strife and bondage of the earthly kingdom.

In order for one to move from one kingdom to the other one must recognize and confess they are in need of help and ask God for it in Jesus' name. This is all it takes. The keys to the kingdom on which Jesus has built his church is simply the recognition of Jesus Christ as Lord. Jesus made this clear in his conversation with his disciples. He asked them who they thought he was and Peter confessed, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). Jesus answered him, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt 16:18, 19).

The confession that "Jesus is the Son of God" is the rock on which the church is built and the key which gains access. One becomes a full citizen of God and is justified before God by grace through faith in the confession of Jesus Christ. It is not something flesh and blood can give but pure gift from the Father who reveals himself to us in Christ.

However, being a citizen and acting like a citizen can be two things. Luther himself makes this distinction when he refers to "true Christians." Luther acknowledges that not all who call themselves Christian are faithful to their citizenry or are properly guided by the

Gospel, but are still more subject to the flesh. Because “True Christians ‘are few and far between;...it is necessary, in order that evil may not triumph, to have law and enforceable order.’”¹⁸ Luther understood that the kingdom on the left was still necessary, until the return of Christ, and because of the power of sin and evil, to keep even Christians in order.

The world has changed much since the time of Luther. We now live in a post-Christendom world, where the church is no longer central. There is rampant individualism. There is a fact/value split. Religion no longer has any claim to universal truth. The church has been thoroughly divided from the world, even in the mind of Christians. The Sunday/Monday split is the schizophrenic understanding that many Christians lead a double life where they have a private faith they practice on one hand and a public life they lead on the other, and never the twain shall meet.

The Gospel in this postmodern reality has been reduced to mean that God loves you, God died for you, your sins are forgiven, and when you die, you will get into heaven. In the meantime, go do your own thing—pursue happiness on your own apart from serving God with your life.

The ELCA and other mainline denominations have been in decline for the last 50 years. The ELCA boasts just over 5 million baptized members, but the number of those regular attending worship and participating in the life of the church is 1.5 million—70 percent of the members of God’s kingdom in the Lutheran Church are not actively living in their baptismal covenant. They are missing out! They are citizens of the kingdom, but living like the unsaved. They remain untransformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The implications for a missional theology using Luther’s understanding of Two Kingdoms doctrine would be concerned with two things: First, Christians called by the

¹⁸ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, trans. Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 5.

Gospel and properly enlightened to the truth of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ would have first of all have a passion (as Jesus did) for those who are not in the kingdom, who have not heard the Good News, who have not yet received an invitation to the banquet. This is the first priority of Jesus and his church. Second, the main concern for Christian mission is the call to transformation of those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord, but who have not fully articulated the kingdom on the right into their lives (not that any of us do fully). Shouldn't we also have a passion for saved Christians still living under the yoke of slavery to this world? Didn't Jesus come to save us from a way of life just as deadly as death itself? Isn't there a way of life full of the gifts of the spirit that can be obtained on earth as it is in heaven? Aren't we sad and/or motivated by the fact that baptized Lutherans are not experiencing true life? If salvation isn't merely *getting to heaven when you die*, but rather a new life experienced in this life by a significant and trusting relationship with Jesus Christ and his people, can we say those not participating in the life of the church are not really saved—a least in the sense of having had their life and mind fully transformed by the Gospel?

The danger of these statements includes the risk of assuming that when one does participate in the life of the church they are living the new life intended by Christ. We know that is not always necessarily true. We cannot say a life active in the church is a guarantee of the new life, but we can say with confidence a life outside the church is not what Christ intended. One type of hypocrisy does not justify negligence. Both are a problem, however, and both should be our passion to address and correct.

The kingdom of this world was created and is sustained by God. It has been undermined by sin, the human will to seek its own way. This undermining by human self-will has led all those who live in the world to seek the things of God, namely—peace, joy, happiness, security, contentment, love—through earthly means. All humans want these things and they seek after them. God wants to provide these things, but humans want to get them

their own way, on their own terms—as they have always done. Therefore, they separate their lives. They may believe in God. They may even love God. Nevertheless, they have not given up their life for God. In seeking after the things of God through earthly means, the things people pursue become perversions. Seeking after security becomes lust for power, fame, and wealth. Instead of finding security, humans become more insecure. They seek to satisfy that insecurity through the flesh, and in doing so become materialistic and addictive. In the book of Exodus, God sends manna to provide for the daily needs of the people. What happens to those who want extra security, who gather more than they need for the day? “And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over until morning.’ But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul” (Exod 16:19, 20). We have a natural inclination to seek more for ourselves than we need, and it causes our lives to breed worms and become foul.

Living in the kingdom of God on the left is intended by God to be good. It was to be fully enjoyed and enriched by peace, joy, love, and contentment. However, it is corrupted. The mission of God is to heal this corruption. The act of God in Jesus Christ is an intervention from the kingdom on the right, into the kingdom on the left, with the intention of bringing those heavenly values into the world. They come only one way, from God through Christ. We experience them only one way, but dying to the one and rising to the other. There is a transformation that God desires and it has to do with the Two Kingdoms. That transformation is about allegiance to God and the things of God. For all Christians this is a life-long process, which is not completed until the day of Jesus Christ. It is this transformative process that we as Christians struggle to express.

It is a process that we cannot control, but is one to which we must submit to in order to be changed by God. From a Two Kingdoms perspective, you could generally say there are three types of people in the world. These are (1) those who are unsaved, who do not know, or

know but do not accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ; (2) those who are saved, who have heard the Gospel and have accepted it, but are not changed by it, but still live according to the world and its values and agenda. In terms of salvation, we could talk about what it means to be saved. Is knowing and accepting the Gospel but refusing to be shaped by it any kind of salvation? This understanding of salvation stems from the reduction of the Gospel to mean salvation is what happens to you when you die. This is the type of theology Luther rejected which he called, “The Word without the Cross.”¹⁹ Soren Kierkegaard called it “Admiring Christ instead of following Christ.”²⁰ In addition, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it “Cheap grace rather than costly grace.”²¹ (3) There are those who accept the Gospel and who attempts each day to live out the covenant of their baptism, in daily humble obedience to God, who allow the Gospel to shape their lives—a daily death of the self and resurrection to service in God’s kingdom for God’s mission in the world.

Leadership, from a Two Kingdoms perspective has two places. The first is leadership in the world, for the world. Leaders in the kingdom on the left, whether Christian or not, are concerned with forming community that is based in law and justice so that peace and harmony may flourish. Good leadership concerns itself with inspiring and directing people toward good causes. This is from God, (Christian or not) and is intended for the good of all. It can be corrupted and does become corrupted because of the great, endless, and subtle temptations to abuse the power that comes with it. Even the church itself is susceptible to such corruption and can be especially vulnerable to it.

¹⁹ Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

²⁰ Søren Kierkegaard and Charles E. Moore, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

Jesus contrasted the leadership of the world with the leadership needed for the kingdom on right. He said leadership for the church would be different from worldly leadership: "But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'" (Matt 20:25-28).

God raised up a number of leaders throughout the biblical narrative. All of them had skills and gifts for leading. They were servants of God for leading God's people in the world. God called many of them into political roles to lead the nation. Jesus comes as the first one sent by God for leading in purely a spiritual way. Jesus is not interested in Pharaoh, or Herod, or the Romans, or the political situation in the world as were Joseph, Moses, and David, among others. He simply shrugs off such worldly concerns and calls us to see a whole new reality, as though the secular and political world were not ultimately important, as though we should rise above it and concern ourselves with the more important matters—lost sheep and broken people.

Luther's separation of the church and state is a good thing, because being in a Christendom society has only managed to confuse our identity and purpose as a church and too often has cheapened our mission toward an earthly, political agenda. Now that the Two Kingdoms are more separated and the church is more marginalized, we can now more easily see how many souls are still confined to the earthly realm and are in need of salvation. We can see more clearly now our task of reaching out to those not yet participating in the kingdom of God. We also can see more clearly those who have been baptized and confess Jesus as Lord, but who still live according to the flesh—who live according to the world. They need saving too. They need transformation too.

Christian missional leadership can be distinguished from all other kinds of leadership because it concerns itself primarily with the *missio Dei*. From a Two Kingdoms perspective, is easy to define—it is getting people into God’s kingdom and transforming their lives—baptizing and making disciples. It is catching and cleaning. Being a missional leader is what it means to be a Christian. When we give our lives to God, we give up our own will and allow God to live in and through us. God’s will and intention for each of our lives is expressed clearly through the ministry of Jesus as he sums up each of the Gospels:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19, 20)

And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15)

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24: 45-47)

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." (John 20:21)

The mission is clear and simple. Proclaim the kingdom, baptize people into it, teach them about it, and send them out to proclaim it. Each and every Christian has this call to missional leadership—to lead others into the kingdom of God.

The evangelism strategy of the ELCA calls for prayer and spiritual renewal as its first task.²² Indeed, we as a church need to begin by recognizing the condition of things as they are today and confess our need for God’s help in rectifying it. Through prayer and spiritual renewal, we can be changed as a church and as a people. With God’s strength we can

²² Task Force on Evangelism, "Evangelism Strategy: Sharing Faith in a New Century: A Vision for Evangelism in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," Paper presented at the 2003 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Indianapolis, IN, August 2003.

overcome our resistance to evangelism and become a force for God in the world, bringing the gospel to a broken world, to broken people, especially to those in the margins who might otherwise feel excluded.

Another part of the strategy is developing evangelical leaders. For the church, this has often meant expensive (and not always effective) training and education. I believe we can find what we are looking for right under our noses. At a recent meeting with our synodical bishop, we had a discussion over the evangelism strategy. We broke into several groups. Each group was to study a different aspect of the ELCA's four calls to action: (1) becoming a praying church; (2) developing evangelical leaders, (3) starting and renewing congregations; and (4) teaching discipleship. I met with the group talking about developing leaders. Our conversation was constantly being confused between teaching discipleship and leadership. We realized we were having trouble making a distinction between the two. We wanted to say they were one and the same, but could not conclude as much. What we ended up with was this: discipleship training was about deepening faith and commitment, while leadership was about directing disciples in the mission of the church. I would argue, from the context of the Two Kingdoms doctrine, discipleship is learning how to die to the world and live for God's kingdom, and leadership is showing others how to do the same. Christian leadership is the culmination of discipleship. When one enters the kingdom of God it is God's intention they become a leader in that kingdom—that they lead others there. Christians are to become disciples, and disciples are to become leaders, and leaders lead others into the kingdom. For some this can happen almost instantly. For the vast majority it happens slowly, over time, with much pain and suffering. Dying is never easy or done willingly. What we lack within the Lutheran church are practical ways people can develop their faith and grow into the leaders God wants them to be.

The disciples we need for the work of God do not need high-cost education and training. God uses ordinary people most effectively. “*Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus*” (Acts 4:13). Ordinary people need only inspiration and direction (good leadership) to do the mission of God. I believe we start with those most invested in the kingdom of God—those (20%) currently active and growing Christians who see the kingdom, are living the kingdom, and are willing to act for it—who just need some inspiration and direction. We begin with those who Jesus began with, the ordinary people who are already around us who are willing to do God’s bidding—those who continue to attend our churches and give generously. Inspire them with vision and passion for what God wants to do through them. God does amazing things through ordinary people in the world.

Rick Warren’s book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, has inspired leaders in the church. In it, he asks the question, “What drives your church?”²³ He challenges leaders to organize their congregation around the right purpose. Once organized around the right purpose a church (God the Holy Spirit) will inspire all kinds of leadership within the church. However, he argues, this does not happen completely by accident. There must be structures in place that help move people from attendees into members, from members into disciples, from disciples into leaders in mission. This is what we clearly lack in our Lutheran tradition, structures of spiritual development and growth, perhaps for fear of marginalizing our theology of grace.

Had Luther written his Two Kingdoms Doctrine for the purpose of mission he might begin by saying you are saved by grace through faith. Nothing can improve your standing before God because God could not love you any more. Because God loves you so much, God

²³ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub., 1995).

wants to lead you into a way of life that will fill you with joy, peace, and contentment beyond belief—a peace that passes all understanding. That life involves dying to the things of this world and rising daily to the things of God’s kingdom—living in God’s kingdom, living for God’s values and purposes. One does not obtain possessions in this new life, but treasures far beyond measure. When one finds this treasure, they become so excited about it they want the others to know about it too. They do not hide their lamp under a bushel, but let it shine so that others may come to know the truth and be free.

This restored life in Christ is God’s mission. God seeks the unsaved with the Gospel of love and truth and breaks in through the power of the cross. God extends through Jesus, and you and me, the Gospel, the unconditional invitation to participate in God’s kingdom. Therefore, we are made members of the kingdom through faith. In baptism we become members of God’s family and God’s kingdom. However, God does not stop there. This is just the beginning. God then seeks to transform our lives—from living according the values and goals of the kingdom on the left, to living for the values, goals, and purposes of the kingdom on the right.

What is needed therefore in the Lutheran church is a two-fold effort. One is inreach and one is outreach. We need to go outside the walls of our church as the Lord instructs, but we need to do that with people whose lives have been transformed by the Gospel. It is too much for pastors alone. But this should not be difficult, because when the Gospel has transformed your life you go willingly. My sense is people are reluctant because they are unsure of themselves. They need prayer, preparation, direction, and inspiration—transformation. With good leadership they will go. Strong leadership is needed and a new vision, a passion for saving lives, a missional ecclesiology—a Lutheran missional theology.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

In a recent conversation with the pastor of a neighboring congregation, the point of my research was made clear. I was not looking for the conversation—it was a God thing. This pastor telephoned and asked if I would be on call for his parish while he was out of town. This neighboring congregation has 681 members with 200 each week in Sunday worship. In the course of this conversation, this pastor mentioned that he had heard I was doing a study at Luther Seminary regarding church growth. The ensuing conversation affirmed my efforts toward this study. The pastor said this: “I don’t understand why we are not growing. We are doing everything right, we should be growing.” He also said within that same conversation these words: “I have had members tell me ‘If I wanted to be a part of a big church I would go down the street to the big church.’” These two statements by this pastor state exactly the issues I hope to examine in this study. It is my impression that Lutheran clergy and church leaders have been attempting to grow their congregations while in those same congregations there are unseen forces of growth resistance at work keeping congregations just the size they are.

This research studies attitudes about congregational numerical growth and what their role may play in the growth and/or growth limitations of a congregations. Three groups within the congregation are identified and studied—pastors, key leaders, and lay members. The research seeks measure for attitudes of growth and non-growth and relates how those attitudes may play a role in the growth or non-growth of a congregation from a systems

theory perspective. It seeks to understand how these attitudes might play a part in the phenomenon of congregational size plateau, particularly in congregations that plateau from 125 to 250 per week in average worship attendance. The research examines the practices congregations, key leaders, and pastors have around visitors, church size, leadership opportunities, member assimilation, and pastoral expectations; from this analysis comes insight into the dynamics at work in the pastoral size church. Those insights are used to reflect on the matter of sociological space and its implications for congregation growth from a systems perspective.

The study begins with a general description and statistical analysis of the MAS using data from the 2000 census and from the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation as well as the ELCA Office of the Secretary. Data and research will give some context and comparison of the MAS to congregations across the ELCA.

This study uses a three-phase sequential mixed methods exploratory approach—QUAL/QUAN/QUAL—to examine some attitudes among pastors, key leaders, and regular members regarding congregation numerical growth. I hope to offer some insight as to why some Lutheran congregations in the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod worshipping between 125 to 250 average Sunday worship attendance have not grown beyond an average of worshipping 250 people per week over a period of years, while operating in an area of numerical population growth.¹

To identify congregations for the study, a survey of MAS congregations was made to determine which congregations fall within the parameters of the study using two criteria, (1) the congregation has maintained average annual worship attendance numbers from 125 to

¹ The range of numbers varies for many church growth experts with regard to the plateau sizes. Most put the number at 150 average Sunday worship attendance, but 250 is the maximum size identified by Alice Mann in her book, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition*.

250 (using Mann's theory that pastoral size churches can grow as large as 250 with gifted leadership) per Sunday, based on congregational reports from 1990 to 2005, and, (2) the congregation is currently serving in an area of general population growth according to census reports from 1990 to 2000 and projected to 2005. This factor is determined by inputting the congregational zip code into the Census 2000 website to get a current area population report.

Once these congregations are identified according the criteria, pastors of these congregations were contacted and asked for their willingness to participate. Participating congregations were asked to engage in three processes, (1) the pastor agrees to a qualitative interview, (2) the pastor agrees to allow and facilitate a survey of the congregation, and (3) the pastor provides the names of 4 key leaders for the purpose of qualitative and quantitative surveying.

Once permissions are obtained from the pastors, quantitative surveys were sent out to participating congregations. While waiting for the surveys to return, pastors were interviewed by telephone and asked a set of ten questions. These qualitative interview questions were field-tested and include the following:

1. Are you currently satisfied with the numerical size of this congregation?
2. Do you perceive a potential for growth at this congregation?
3. How do you perceive that potential?
4. Have you attempted to grow this congregation?
5. What attempts have you made?
6. What has been effective? What has not?
7. What do you see as the biggest challenge to overcome for growth?
8. How are new visitors and new members treated in this congregation?
9. How are people assimilated into the life of this congregation?
10. How hard is it for new people to assimilate into this community?

These questions are designed to get a sense for the operational ecclesiology, attitudes toward mission and outreach, and how intentional these congregations are in their efforts to minister to the stranger. While it is difficult to measure for sociological or psychological space, I attempt to reveal through these questions a sense for the openness/closedness of the congregation as a social system and the general posture of the congregation and pastor toward the outsider. Interviews with pastors were recorded and transcribed for final analysis.

Pastors, in addition to the qualitative interview, are also asked to take a short quantitative survey that was included in the mailing and similar to the surveys of the congregation. Pastor surveys were printed on a separate colored paper with only one of the questions reworded. The second question of the quantitative Likert survey asks, "Having a personal relationship with the pastor is essential to me." For pastors this question is reworded to ask, "Having a personal relationship with members is essential to me." These surveys are given to each of the study groups and are examined for similarities and significant differences among the three groups.

Also included in the survey is list of questions designed to measure attitudes and expectations around the role of the pastor in a congregation. Size transition experts teach us that in order for a congregation to allow for growth it must adjust its expectations around the role of the pastor.² Questions designed by Roy Oswald are used to measure clergy and lay attitudes toward role expectations, found in chapter two of his book *Making Your Church More Inviting*. These questions help discover in plateaued congregations whether the pastoral role expectation is one of the factors for growth limitations. For the pastors the following questions are asked:

² Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, NY: F. H. Revell, 1991), 181-196.

“If you have a week full of crisis and only limited time left, which of the following activities would you most likely choose, given a choice between A or B?”

- | | |
|---|---|
| A. Visit more shut ins? | B. Prepare a better sermon? |
| A. Attend a wedding reception? | B. Go on a retreat with parish staff? |
| A. Call on a prospective members? | B. Conduct a training session for church officers? |
| A. Visit a bereaved family? | B. Help two church officers resolve a conflict? |
| A. Make a hospital call on a fringe member? | B. Attend a continuing education event? |
| A. Give pastoral counseling to members? | B. Attend a planning event with officers? |
| A. Call on parishioners? | B. Recruit leaders for parish events? |
| A. Attend an activity with parish youth? | B. Critique a meeting with a church officer? ³ |

As congregations grow beyond the 125 to 250 plateau, the need for pastors to move away from “A” activities toward “B” activities is essential if the church can continue to grow. Making this transition is difficult for pastors, and expectations among lay people for “A” type pastoral activities and involvement may make it impossible for pastors to make the transition. Measuring the views and attitudes of pastors and lay people around these expectations will help to better understand the dynamics at work in limiting congregations from potential growth.

Groups of key lay leaders selected from the participating pastors’ congregations, provided by the pastors, were selected for qualitative interviews. The key leaders were selected based on the criterion that the pastor identify leaders in the church who stand out as

³Reprinted from *Making Your Church More Inviting: A Step-by-Step Guide for In-Church Training* by Roy M. Oswald, with permission from the Alban Institute. Copyright © 1992 by The Alban Institute, Inc. Herndon, VA. All rights reserved.

key leaders and who would be willing to participate in this study. Both the pastors and key leaders are asked this same qualitative set of question, but the question for the key leaders for the Oswald questions is phrased thusly: “Which of these activities would you expect your pastor to do?” The four key leaders from each congregation are also given the quantitative survey to be used in the QUAN analysis.

The quantitative survey was designed, field-tested, sent, and administered to members of those ten congregations. These were given on a random Sunday during the month of July, 2006, during worship to adults present who are willing to participate. Questions on the survey include the aforementioned Oswald pastoral expectations questions along with the following general demographic variables: Gender; Year of birth; Current Age; Year Joined the Church; Marital Status; Previous Church Size Experience; Previous Denominational Experience; Educational attainment; Frequency of worship. Furthermore, the survey also addresses the following questions with the responses employing self-anchoring Likert Scales ranging in strength of agreement from 1 to 5, with 1 as “very high agreement” and 5 as “very low agreement.” The number 6 is used to represent “Don’t know.” The questions employed are:

1. I prefer the size of this church.
2. Having a personal relationship with the pastor is essential to me.
3. This church should grow in size.
4. There are many ways for new people to get involved here.
5. If this church got too big I would consider leaving.
6. I make certain to greet and welcome visitors and newcomers.
7. We do a good job of evangelism and outreach here.
8. This church should grow in membership.
9. There are many opportunities for leadership here.

10. I don't understand why we don't grow.

On return of the surveys, the questionnaire data was loaded into SPSS. Records and variables were validated. The data was processed and results were broken down into two main categories, descriptive and inferential. The descriptive analysis summarizes the data set using descriptive statistics, and included frequency distributions to show totals, percentages, and means to describe and summarize the survey results.

For inferential analysis two separate sets of analysis was used. ANOVA testing was used to test for differences in means among the groups being compared. The null hypothesis can be stated, "There is no difference in attitude about congregational numerical growth between pastors, key leaders, and regular members." For the Likert questions, four of the questions used in the survey were further recoded into dichotomous responses and simple cross tabulations were used to show response results.

The ANOVA sought a p-value of less than 0.05, to reject the null hypothesis and to conclude that there is a statistically significant difference in means between the dependent the groups being compared. The results were summarized and interpreted along with the findings from both sets of qualitative interviews and in relation to the thesis hypothesis.

For the final QUAL survey, focus groups consisting of two key leaders from each participating congregation were contacted by telephone for a conference interview. These qualitative group interviews explored attitudes among key leaders toward church growth, operational ecclesiologies, attitudes toward mission and outreach, and how intentional these congregations are in their efforts to minister to the stranger. Again, as with the pastor interviews, they were used to measure for openness/closedness of the congregation. The questions are the same as those asked of the pastors:

1. Are you currently satisfied with the numerical size of this congregation?
2. Do you perceive a potential for growth at this congregation?

3. How do you perceive that potential?
4. Have you attempted to grow this congregation?
5. What attempts have you made?
6. What has been effective? What has not?
7. What do you see as the biggest challenge to overcome for growth?
8. How are new visitors and new members treated in this congregation?
9. How are people assimilated into the life of this congregation?
10. How hard is it for new people to assimilate into this community?

These interviews were recorded and transcribed. The QUAL results from both groups, pastors and key leader, were then analyzed and coded for themes, labels, and concepts according to the methodologies outlined in chapters 10, 11 and 12 of the book, *Qualitative Interviewing; The Art of Hearing Data*.⁴ Qualitative research findings were compiled, compared, and reported. They were summarized and interpreted along with the findings from the quantitative survey results and in relation to the working hypothesis of this paper.

Significance of the Research

Pastors today are inundated with literature about church growth principles. Unless the systemic issues and dynamics of a congregation are recognized and addressed there is little hope new principles and programs will have much long-lasting or meaningful change. I hope this research will allow for the possibility of a new paradigm, but more than just a paradigm or analogy. I want to address the ontological reality for understanding the dynamics and limitations of congregational growth and vitality. Understanding what the deeper limitations

⁴Herbert J. Rubin and Irene S. Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing; The Art of Hearing Data* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 201-273.

are in congregational development will better prepare leaders to address those limitations and provide new useful insights for transforming congregations toward effective mission for God. Understanding what the deeper limitations are in congregational development will better inform us as we ask how our ecclesiology and church practice reflect the value of the outsider and how much they exclude the possibility for new relationships? How can a full congregation with no capacity to faithfully incorporate an outsider serve the mission of Christ?

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

The population of Minnesota has grown by an estimated 757,700 people between 1990 and 2005.¹ Much of this growth was in the urban and suburban areas around Minneapolis and St. Paul. Between these same years, during the influx of three quarters of a million people however, the Minneapolis Area Synod (MAS) declined from 176 congregations to 169 and from 223,644 baptized members to 221,432.² This is a 4% decline in congregations and a 1% decline in membership over a period of time when population grew at a rate of over 17 percent. Nationally, the United States experienced its highest numerical population increase for any decade in history between the years 1990 and 2000.³ In spite of that population increase, the ELCA as a whole has experienced steady decline, both in numbers of congregations and numbers of baptized members, as shown in Table 5.1.⁴

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Population Finder, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFPopulation?_event=Search&geo_id=01000US&_geoContext=01000US&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=04000US27&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=geoSelect&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&_submenuId=population_0&ds_name=null&_ci_nbr=null&q_r_name=null®=%3Anull&_keyword=&_industry= (accessed December 2006).

² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Department for Research and Evaluation, summary of Congregational Statistics as of 12/31/90 and 12/31/05 and published by the ELCA Office of the Secretary, Chicago, IL. Data provided by Dann Taylor, ELCA research specialist.

³ Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops. *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, Census 2000 Special Reports (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2002) <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2007).

⁴ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Statistics Compiled by the ELCA Office of the Secretary," <http://www.elca.org/news/table.html> (accessed September 2006).

TABLE 5.1**National ELCA Congregational Membership Records 1990 to 2005**

Year	Members	Change	Percent of Change	Congregations	Change	Percent of Change
1990	5,240,739	1,941	0.04	11,087	20	0.18
1991	5,245,177	4,438	0.08	11,074	-13	-0.12
1992	5,234,568	-10,609	-0.20	11,055	-19	-0.17
1993	5,212,785	-21,783	-0.42	11,023	-32	-0.29
1994	5,199,048	-13,737	-0.26	10,973	-50	-0.45
1995	5,190,489	-8,559	-0.16	10,955	-18	-0.16
1996	5,187,363	-3,126	-0.06	10,936	-19	-0.17
1997	5,185,055	-2,308	-0.04	10,889	-47	-0.43
1998	5,178,225	-6,830	-0.13	10,862	-27	-0.25
1999	5,149,668	-28,557	-0.55	10,851	-11	-0.10
2000	5,125,919	-23,749	-0.46	10,816	-35	-0.32
2001	5,099,877	-26,042	-0.51	10,766	-50	-0.46
2002	5,038,006	-61,871	-1.21	10,721	-45	-0.42
2003	4,984,925	-53,081	-1.05	10,657	-64	-0.60
2004	4,930,429	-54,496	-1.09	10,585	-72	-0.68
2005	4,850,776	-79,653	-1.62	10,549	-36	-0.34

At the end of the fiscal year of 2005, the MAS consisted of 167 congregations. Table 5.2 shows the size and breakdown of these congregations according to size types. This table shows that the MAS has a higher percentage of larger congregations than the

TABLE 5.2**MAS Congregational Sizes Compared to National Congregations**

Size Type	Total Number In MAS	Ave. Weekly Worship	Percent of MAS Congregations	Percent of National Congregations
Mega	15	801 +	9	1
Corporate	41	351-800	25	6
Program	53	151-350	32	24
Pastoral	51	51-150	30	47
Small	6	1-50	4	22

national average.⁵ The most common size of ELCA congregation nationally, by a large margin however, is the pastoral size congregation, making up nearly half of all ELCA Lutheran Congregations nationally. A size range of 125 to 250 in worship, as defined for this thesis, might encompass and apply to more than half of all ELCA congregations. Consequently, this study may have implications for a very large number of churches nationally.

Congregations were selected for this study by using two sets of criteria; 1) congregations were located in an area of general population growth between the years 1990 and 2005 with anticipated continued growth according the 2000 census data,⁶ and 2) their average weekly Sunday worship attendance averaged between 125 to 250 according to annual congregational report data for a fifteen-year period, from 1990 to 2005, based on data provided through the ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation.⁷

The MAS has 51 pastoral-sized congregations and an even larger number of program-sized congregations (unlike the national average, which has twice as many pastoral-sized as program-sized). It is possible that many of these program-sized congregations continue to function like pastoral-sized congregations, but have grown unnaturally large due to the population growth of the area and the high density of Lutherans in the demographic.

⁵Based on information from ELCA Department for Research and Evaluation, Minneapolis Area Synod Statistics,” <http://www.elca.org/Research/synoddata/updown03/updownr18.pdf> (accessed September 2006), and “How Large is Your Congregation Compared with All ELCA Congregations?” <http://elca.org/research/reports/re/attendancesizefor2003.pdf> (accessed September 2006).

⁶U.S. Census Bureau, “Census 2000,” <http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html> (accessed June, 2006).

⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Department for Research and Evaluation, summary of Congregational Statistics as of 12/31/90 and 12/31/05 and published by the ELCA Office of the Secretary, Chicago, IL. Data provided by Dann Taylor, ELCA research specialist.

Minnesota ranks second nationally, after North Dakota, for the most ELCA Lutheran adherents per 1,000 of population according to the ARDA.⁸

Forty of the MAS congregations report worship attendance averaging from 125 to 250 in worship over the 15-year period from 1990 to 2005. Using Census 2000 data, it was determined that 21 of the 40 congregations are currently in areas of general population growth based on census results using the congregation zip codes. Six of those 21 congregations report declining worship numbers despite being in areas of population growth, with total average worship attendance losses over the fifteen-year period ranging from 1.3% to 27.0%. The decline rates, when there is decline, in areas of population growth seem rather significant. This would be an interesting study in itself (As an aside, several Lutheran congregations in areas of stable populations had even higher rates of decline than those in growing areas, rates of loss such as 56.8%, 35.3%, 64.0%, 65.0%, and 35.4%).

Of the 15 growing congregations in areas of population growth, two have growth rates between zero and ten percent and thirteen have higher growth rates. Those congregations with higher than 10% growth rates tended to have rates of 20% or higher—with one as high as 112.6% (congregations starting after 1990 are not included in this particular measure). Relative to their population growth context, however, few of the congregations are keeping pace with area growth. Table 5.3 represents a growth-rate breakdown in the fifteen-year period from 1990 to 2005 of the 15 growing congregations located in growing population areas of the MAS. The table compares congregational average worship growth rates to population rates based on census data from 1990 to 2000, with projected estimates of growth from 2000 to 2005 from the Minnesota State Demographer's

⁸The Association for Religion Data Archive, "Evangelical Lutheran Church In America—Rates of Adherence Per 1000 Population (2000)," <http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/maps/map.asp?state=101&variable=186> (accessed October, 2006).

office. Zip codes were used as search criteria to determine growing populations for the period between 1990 to 2000 and city names were used for the estimates from 2000 to 2005 (2000 to 2005 estimates are not available for zip codes).

TABLE 5.3

Growth rate breakdown of growing MAS Congregations compared with local populations growth rates 1990 to 2005

Congregation	Average Worship Numbers from 1990 to 2005	Percent Change	Population Growth Percents from 1990 to 2005 based on Congregations Zip Codes and Cities.
1	125—176	+40.1	+7.2
2	170—180	+5.9	+76.0
3	115—145	+26.1	+7.2
4	125—176	+40.8	+148.9
5*	0—196	+196.0	+149.9
6*	0—159	+159.0	+464.6
7	200—233	+16.5	+239.3
8	148—200	+35.1	+320.7
9	115—170	+47.8	+204.8
10	99—127	+28.2	+1.2
11	95—202	+112.6	+49.2
12	204—245	+20.0	+2.99
13	232—233	+0	+38.4
14	110—137	+24.5	+1.2
15*	0—131	+131.0	+179.8

* Congregations incorporated after 1990

For the sake of this study, I will include congregations in population growth areas experiencing a level rate of average worship attendance (plateau) over the last fifteen years, and a range of 125 to 250 in average Sunday worship per year. Churches in areas of seven percent population growth rates and higher were selected for the study, with worship attendance that remains relatively constant over that same period. The idea was to find plateaued churches in areas of population growth to study potential growth inhibiting factors. Applying the criteria of plateau over a fifteen-year period and a seven percent population growth rate or better, ten congregations were identified for this study.

Descriptive Statistics

The pastors of the ten congregations gave permission for this study. All ten identified congregations are led by a male clergyperson. After sending the surveys to each congregation and following up with phone calls, three of the ten pastors changed their minds and decided not to go through with the survey. Interestingly, all three gave the same reason. Each of the three pastors stated their congregation was currently at a fragile point in time and that to do this survey would confuse and possibly mislead the congregation. Each pastor was apologetic. Each was willing to participate in being surveyed and interviewed themselves, but did not feel comfortable giving the survey to their congregations. Of the seven participating congregations, no apprehension was expressed among any other leader about doing the survey.

The surveys were given during a random Sunday worship service in July 2006. They were distributed and instructions were given that anyone willing to participate could do so. Surveys were collected and returned. Rates of return results are summarized in Table 5.4.

TABLE 5.4

Survey frequency results

Congregation Number	Frequency	Percent
192	21	6.0
22	35	9.9
14	36	10.2
20	48	13.6
16	52	14.8
9	76	21.6
11	81	23.0
4	1	.3
18	1	.3
19	1	.3
Total	352	100.0

Ten congregations responded, seven with surveys completed by congregation members. Congregational identification numbers are changed to protect the anonymity of the congregations. There are 352 total survey respondents, ten of those being pastors. The total number of surveys returned from each congregation are listed in the frequency column ranging from one (pastors of non-participating congregations) to 81. The lowest number of respondents from any participating congregation is 21.

Data is missing in the category of gender on 23 surveys, as indicated in Table 5.5 below. Of the 329 respondents 198 (60.2%) were female and 131 (39.8%) were male.

TABLE 5.5

Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Male	131	39.8
Female	198	60.2
Total	329	100.0

Age was evenly spread across a spectrum of ages ranging from age 11-91, with a slightly larger proportion represented among the baby-boomer-aged respondents. The median age of respondents is 48.

TABLE 5.6

Current age

N	352
Median	48

Table 5.7 shows that a much higher percentage of respondents joined the congregation in more recent years. There seems to be a much higher grouping of respondents who joined since 1990. While the total range is from 1938 to 2005, the median of 1994 is

much closer to 2005, indicating a much higher number of respondents coming from those who joined in more recent years.

TABLE 5.7

Year Joined

N	351
Median	1994

If the data are recoded to separate these groups into ranges from 1938 to 1970, from 1971 to 1989, and from 1990 to 2005, the results show there were 10 times more recent joiners than the members who belonged the longest, and there were three times more recent joiners than members of the second longest belonging group (see Table 5.8). These differences could mean that more recent joiners more likely to respond to a survey. It could reflect the transient nature of the culture. It shows a high influx of new, active membership in this size of congregation, and a high turnover rate of activity and participation.

Table 5.8

Year Joined Recoded

Years Joined	Frequency	Percent
1938 - 1970	23	6.9
1971 - 1989	77	23.2
1990 - 2005	232	69.9
Total	332	100.0

The respondents also had a variation in marital status. A very high proportion of respondents, 76.5%, are married, while 13.6% are single, 6.1% are divorced, and 3.8% are widowed (see Table 5.9).

TABLE 5.9

Marital Status

Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Married	264	76.5
Single	47	13.6
Divorced	21	6.1
Widowed	13	3.8
Total	345	100.0

When asked about previous-church-size-experience 56.0% of respondents indicated “large” (200+) in worship, while 31.4% indicated “medium” (100-199 in worship), and 12.6% indicated small previous church size (less than 100 in worship)(see Table 5.10). The number of respondents who indicate small previous church size experience is fewer than the missing responses, which was 12.2% of the total responses: The previous denominational

TABLE 5.10

Previous Church Size Experience

Previous Church Size Number in worship	Frequency	Percent
Small (<100)	39	12.6
Medium (100-199)	97	31.4
Large (200+)	173	56.0
Total	309	100.0

experience shows 81.2% responded “Lutheran” while the remainder answered either “Catholic” (7.9%) or “Other Mainline” (9.7%). Only four (1.2%) responded “Other non-mainline” (see Table 5.11).

TABLE 5.11

Previous Denominational Experience

Previous Denomination	Frequency	Percent
Lutheran	277	81.2
Catholic	27	7.9
Other Mainline	33	9.7
Other non-mainline	4	1.2
Total	341	100.0

Educational attainment shows this to be an unusually highly educated group of respondents. The category of response most often selected is the highest level available on the survey. Postgraduate work was reported by 33.8% of respondents, and college graduate was reported by 28.8% of the respondents. This means over half of the respondents were college educated and higher, with a very high proportion of those having done post-graduate work. The national averages for these categories in the United States, according to Census

TABLE 5.12

Educational Attainment

Highest Educational Attainment	Frequency	Percent
High school	67	19.7
Specialized training	60	17.6
College	98	28.8
Post Graduate Work	115	33.8
Total	340	100.0

2000, is high school 28.6%, college 15.4%, and post graduate work 5.9%.⁹ This would indicate there is a very high consolidation of highly educated people—compared with national averages in the general population—attending these congregations. This might also influence response to surveys. More highly educated people may have more experience with and support for the survey as an instrument of study, and may be more inclined to respond to them. Furthermore, and in retrospect, it would have been more helpful if the survey instrument had been more carefully worded to indicate the highest level *attained*. Responses could have been clearer, such as college “*degree*” and postgraduate “*degree*.” The results then could have been used with more confidence in being able to say whether these were actual attainments, or mere experiences. Nonetheless, the level of education in these congregations is impressive.

The final demographic category, “Frequency of Worship,” shows this group of respondents is highly dedicated to the weekly worship of the congregation. It is noteworthy that this survey was taken in July when many of the less committed tend not to be present

TABLE 5.13

Frequency of worship

Frequency of Worship	Frequency	Percent
Weekly	295	85.0
A Few times Per Month	37	10.7
Monthly at Least	9	2.6
Several times per year	6	1.7
Total	347	100.0

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, “Census 2000, American Factfinder, Education,” http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/QTTable?_bm=y&geo_id=01000US&qr_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U_QTP20&-ds_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U (accessed October 2006).

at worship. Therefore, these findings were obtained from a concentration of the most faithful members in terms of weekly commitment to worship. A total of 85.0% of respondents claim a weekly commitment to worship, and another 10.7% indicated worshipping a few times per month. The remaining responses amount to less than five percent of the total responses.

Summary

This demographic data describes respondents who are primarily married, long-time Lutherans, highly educated, and strongly committed to weekly worship. While not identified necessarily as key leaders in the congregations, it could be said many of these are the core, committed, stake-holding members of the congregation with strong influence in the life of the church. This is an important consideration for this study of the issues of sociological space, ministry expectations these members have, and the influence they may have over the mission and ministry of the congregation.

Oswald Survey Questions

The Oswald survey questions are intended to measure pastoral activity expectations and attitudes among the three groups within the congregations: pastors, key leaders, and regular members. As congregations grow in size pastors, in order to for the congregation to transition from the pastoral-sized congregation to the program-sized congregation, must begin to leave behind “A” type activities and move into “B” type activities. This allows the congregation to accommodate a larger number of people into the life of the congregations and to develop leadership. Pastors who continue to operate primarily in “A” type activities limit their congregational capacity to around 150 in worship because this is the number of people a single pastor can effectively serve with “A” type activities without the help of other

leaders. The pastor’s self-understanding of his or her role will dictate which activities they will prioritize in their ministries. Playing into this are the pressures brought to bear by members of the congregation of the activities they expect from the pastor. If the pastor does not practice “A” activities when there is a strong expectation for “A” activities, it can create conflict which further robs the pastor of time and energy for either type of activity. Reaching and serving new people becomes increasingly difficult under congregational growth circumstances when the “A” type activities are primary expectations.

TABLE 5.14

Oswald question means

	Oswald Q. 1	Oswald Q. 2	Oswald Q.3	Oswald Q. 4	Oswald Q. 5	Oswald Q. 6	Oswald Q. 7	Oswald Q. 8
N	328	316	323	330	328	327	324	323
Mean	1.20	1.66	1.26	1.06	1.14	1.09	1.38	1.07

Table 5.14 shows the overall result between the polar answers of “A” and “B.” The mean indicates whether the total number of answers tended toward “A” or “B.” The mean of lower than 1.5 would indicate that the total number of answers to that question tended to be more “A” answers, while answers above the mean of 1.5 indicates the total number of answers tended toward the “B” answers. The closer to 1.5, the closer the answers are evenly divided. As indicated in Table 5.14, with the exception of one—Oswald question two—all responses tended toward “A” type activity expectations. Frequency tables found in the appendix (Oswald Questions Q.1 through Q. 8) indicate the results of each of the Oswald questions and how, with the exception of question two, the survey answers reflect a strong expectation for “A” type pastoral activities by a high percentage of respondents.

Since the purpose of this research is to study the potential difference in attitude between pastors, key leaders, and regular members, analysis of how these particular groups may have responded to these questions separately is needed. Table 5.15 shows how each

TABLE 5.15

Total Percentage of Oswald Responses

Total Response by Member Type	Regular Members	Percent	Key Leaders	Percent	Pastors	Percent
Total "A" Responses	1846	78.24	104	65.00	47	58.75
Total "B" Response	513	21.75	56	35.00	33	41.25
Total	2359	100.00	160	100.00	80	100.00

of the member types answered all the Oswald questions combined by the total number of answers. Notice regular members expect "A" activities of the pastor by more than three to one, key leaders by nearly two to one, and pastors are inclined toward "A" activities a little more than half the time. These differences will be tested for statistical significance in a following segment of the paper. What might these differences mean for pastoral expectations and how they play out in the internal dynamics of the congregation?

Likert Survey Questions

The second part of this survey includes self-anchoring Likert scale questions intended to measure attitudes toward numerical church growth and attitudes toward growth, church size, evangelism, and sociological space. The results of this section of the survey are

illustrated below in Table 5.16. This table shows that most of the responses reflect either high agreement or very high agreement with the exception of questions five and ten. The mean of question five and ten show that these two questions had lower agreement. The Likert scale is from one to five, so that questions with means higher than 2.5 would move toward agreement, while lower than 2.5 toward disagreement, and near 2.5 neutral.

TABLE 5.16

Likert Scale Frequencies

	Congregation Survey #1	Congregation Survey #2	Congregation Survey #3	Congregation Survey #4	Congregation Survey #5
N	345	345	344	347	333
Mean	4.05	3.99	3.64	4.16	2.02
	Congregation Survey #6	Congregation Survey #7	Congregation Survey #8	Congregation Survey #9	Congregation Survey #10
N	342	339	338	339	317
Mean	3.61	3.49	3.81	4.19	2.52

After the results of the Likert questions were tabulated and analyzed, it was determined the data results were not very helpful. In order to make them more useful the categories were recoded and transformed into new data that will be more helpful for this thesis. Only questions one, two, three, and eight will be used in the recoding as these are questions that have to do with attitudes toward growth. These are recoded as follows: Question one states, "I prefer the size of this church." Agreement on this question would reflect an anti-growth bias, because preferring the size of church would suggest a stated bias for it remaining the size it is. Question two states, "Having a personal relationship with the pastor is essential to me." Agreement on this question reflects an anti-growth bias, because a

pastor can only have so many personal relationships. Agreeing that this relationship is “essential” to the member reflects an anti-growth bias because a pastor can have only so many personal relationships in the church (about 150). Question three states “This church should grow in size.” Agreement with this question clearly reflects a pro-growth attitude. Agreement here reflects acknowledgment of the need and desire for numerical growth. Question eight states, “This church should grow in membership.” Agreement to this question too, much like with question three, reflects a pro-growth attitude for the same reason. Agreement acknowledges the need and desire for numerical growth. These variables are, therefore, recoded to become dichotomous responses of either pro-growth or antigrowth to measure for attitudes and bias toward one or the other. The neutral response for each of these questions is removed as well as “missing” and “don’t know” responses. The recoded variable frequencies results are shown in Tables 5.17 through 5.20 below.

TABLE 5.17

Likert Question 1 Recoded

I prefer the size of this Church	Frequency	Percent
Agreement	271	93.1
Disagreement	20	6.9
Total	291	100.0

TABLE 5.18

Likert Question 2 Recoded

Having a Personal Relationship with the Pastor is Essential	Frequency	Percent
Agreement	257	95.5
Disagreement	12	4.5
Total	269	100.0

TABLE 5.19**Likert Question 3 Recoded**

This Church Should Grow In Size	Frequency	Percent
Agreement	198	85.0
Disagreement	35	15.0
Total	233	100.0

TABLE 5.20**Likert Question 8 Recoded**

This Church Should Grow In Membership	Frequency	Percent
Agreement	233	91.4
Disagreement	22	8.6
Total	255	100.0

The frequency of responses to question one and two show a very strong liking for the current congregation's size (93.1%) as well as an even stronger requirement of having a personal relationship to the pastor (95.5%). Conversely, there is at the same time strong agreement that the congregation should grow in size (85.0%) and in membership (91.4%). These pro-growth and anti-growth sentiments are at odds with each other. Could it be these answers reflect a bias toward agreement with the statements? How can the congregation satisfy both desires? How do these desires play out in the life of the congregation, both consciously and unconsciously in the life of the congregation, particularly when it comes to leadership and mission? Does the strong desire for size and relationship with the pastor outweigh and undermine efforts of evangelism, mission, and growth?

Inferential Statistics

This section of the thesis examines both the Oswald and the recoded Likert scale questions to determine if there are statistically significant differences in the responses of the three study groups, pastors, key leaders, and regular members. By determining if a statistically significant difference exists in their responses, it can be inferred with confidence that their attitudes and expectations play an important and significant role in the internal dynamics of the congregation and the tensions around the issue of congregational numerical membership growth. The Oswald questions are tested using an analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each of the eight Oswald questions, testing for a statistically significant difference in the responses concerning ministry expectations between the three groups. For the recoded Likert scale questions the same ANOVA testing is done to see where statistically significant differences exist between the three groups.

Oswald Questions' Inferential Results

TABLE 5.21

Oswald ANOVA

Oswald ANOVA		Sum of Of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Oswald Question 1	Between Groups	4.059	2	2.029	13.554	.000
	Within Groups	48.661	325	.150		
	Total	52.720	327			
Oswald Question 2	Between Groups	.192	2	.096	.427	.653
	Within Groups	70.251	313	.224		
	Total	70.443	315			
Oswald Question 3	Between Groups	.465	2	.232	1.215	.298
	Within Groups	61.207	320	.191		
	Total	61.672	322			
Oswald Question 4	Between Groups	.177	2	.088	1.485	.228
	Within Groups	19.487	327	.060		
	Total	19.664	329			
Oswald Question 5	Between Groups	1.209	2	.605	5.031	.007
	Within Groups	39.056	325	.120		
	Total	40.265	327			
Oswald Question 6	Between Groups	1.827	2	.914	11.645	.000
	Within Groups	25.420	324	.078		

	Total	27.248	326			
Oswald Quesiton 7	Between Groups	.173	2	.087	.367	.693
	Within Groups	75.888	321	.236		
	Total	76.062	323			
Oswald Question 8	Between Groups	.699	2	.349	5.409	.005
	Within Groups	20.664	320	.065		
	Total	21.362	322			

The ANOVA test on the Oswald questions shows a significant difference between groups at the $p < .05$ level on four of the eight questions, as shown in Table 5.21. They are questions one (A. Visit more shut ins? / B. Prepare a better sermon?), five (A. Make a hospital call? / B. Attend a continuing education event?), six (Give pastoral counseling to members? / B. Attend a planning event with officers?), and eight (A. Attend an activity with parish youth? / B. Critique a meeting with a church officer?). Using post hoc multiple comparisons, employing Tukey HSD, Scheffe, and LSD tests, questions indicating significance in the ANOVA testing are examined further as seen in the post hoc multiple comparison results in Table A-1 (see appendix), for question one. There is no significant difference in response of key leaders and pastors, but both key leaders and pastors had statistically significantly different responses from regular members. In each test on question 1 (A. Visit more shut ins?/ B. Prepare a better sermon), key leaders and pastors do not agree with regular members about what they think the pastor should be doing with his time. Regular members, believe the pastor should be out visiting more shut-ins with his/her limited time (mean = 1.17), while key leaders (mean = 1.45) and pastors (mean = 1.70) see that time better spent preparing a better sermon. The question remaining, in light of these results, is how this expectation is played out in the life of the congregation and the tensions experienced by leaders and pastors in the church?

On question five, there is statistically significant difference between regular members and key leaders. As shown in Table A-2 in the appendix, pastors are not statistically different

in their responses from either key leaders or regular members, but key leaders and regular members are significantly different in their responses to this expectation. While the majority of each of these groups answered “A” to this question, the regular members had a significantly different mean score (mean = 1.12) than did the key leaders (mean = 1.35). The mean scores for pastor (mean = 1.30) and key leader were close to the same, yet the SPSS calculations do not consider this a significant difference from regular member, probably due to the small numbers of pastor respondents. The implications of this question are not as clear. Each of the groups had a majority of “A” answers, but the ratio of “A” to “B” answers was the highest among regular members, next highest among key leaders, but closely followed by pastors. Taking results from all the questions together might suggest that generally among regular members the expectation is toward pastoral care and chaplaincy type activities, while key leaders and pastors lean more toward program and leadership development activities. However, when the situation involves more critical care, like shut-in visits, hospital visits, and youth activities, the expectation by all groups tends more strongly toward pastoral care and chaplaincy expectations. Hospital calls are expected to a much greater degree by the regular members than by the two other groups. Furthermore, on the question between whether to visit a bereaved family or help settle a conflict among church officers (Oswald question 4) the expectations are very clear. All three groups were overwhelmingly in favor of visiting the bereaved.

Looking at Oswald question six, pastors answered significantly differently from both groups of key leaders and regular members. In Table A-3 (see appendix) statistically significance difference is found in every post hoc comparison between pastors and the other two groups. On this question, pastors’ answers were evenly divided (mean = 1.50) while regular members answered “A” over “B” with a statistically significant different mean score (mean = 1.07). Key leaders also had a statistically significant different mean score (mean =

1.15) from pastors, but were not significantly different from regular members. Here the expectation for giving pastoral care to members is far more important to regular members and key leaders than for pastors, who would choose a planning event over giving pastoral care and counseling to members. The question remaining is how this issue gets played out when the pastor is hard-pressed for time, trying to move his/her congregation into mission, and yet must deal with phone calls, emails, and people at the door needing help with personal problems. If the pastor does not deal with those personal problems effectively, or directly, or chooses instead to develop leadership to do those things, what are the implications for that pastor in the face of those expectations? What price will he/she pay for making this unpopular choice and failing to meet strong expectations?

On the final Oswald question, eight, pastors responded differently from regular members in each of the comparisons, but similar to key leaders. In Table A-4 (see appendix) the significant statistical difference is indicated between pastors and regular members in each of the test results. As with question five, there is a majority in each group that would choose activity “A,” “attend an activity with parish youth” instead of “B,” “critique a meeting with a church officer,” but the mean scores show that there is a statistically significant difference between how often regular members (mean = 1.06) would have this expectation compared with pastors. Even so, pastors (mean = 1.30) still chose this answer seven out of ten times. Key leaders (mean = 1.15) also saw this as a high priority for pastors. Apparently, time for the youth is a high priority and high expectation among every study group in the church of this size.

Likert Scale Inferential Results

For the purpose of this study, there are not a great deal of statistically significant findings to be drawn from the Likert scale questions which will help the hypothesis, other

than what was mentioned earlier—that there exists in the respondents the expressed desire, in all three groups studied, to both grow and to stay the same size. The recoded data shows that pastors, key leaders, and regular members all express both desires, pro-growth and anti-growth sentiments, at the same time. There is only one significant finding among the four recoded questions, and that is that regular members prefer the size of their congregation by a significantly higher mean score than do pastors. The majority of pastors, however, still indicate their preference for this particular size of congregation. The cell count for the category of pastor was not large enough to allow any statistical conclusions to be drawn about the difference between pastors and regular members on this question. The three groups agree, however, about how they feel about the size of their church, the importance of a personal relationship with the pastor, and the need for the church to grow in size and membership. The frequency cross tabulations are shown in Tables 5.26 through 5.29 below for each of the four recoded Likert scale questions.

TABLE 5.26

Likert #1 Recoded. “I prefer the size of this church.”

	<u>Member Type</u>						
	Regular Members	Percent	Key Leaders	Percent	Pastors	Percent	Total
Antigrowth	249	94.7	17	85.0	5	62.5	271
Progrowth	14	5.3	3	15.0	3	37.5	20
Total	263		20		8		291

TABLE 5.27

Likert #2 Recoded. “Having a personal relationship to the pastor is essential to me.”
(Pastors were asked, “Having a personal relationship with members is essential to me”)

	<u>Member Type</u>						
	Regular	Percent	Key	Percent	Pastors	Percent	Total

		Members		Leaders				
Total	Antigrowth	231	95.8	16	88.9	10	100.0	257
	Progrowth	10	4.2	2	11.1	0	0.0	12
		241		18		10		269

TABLE 5.28
Likert #3 Recoded. “This church should grow in size.”

		<u>Member Type</u>						Total
		Regular Members	Percent	Key Leaders	Percent	Pastors	Percent	
Total	Antigrowth	32	15.5	2	12.5	1	11.1	35
	Progrowth	175	84.5	14	87.5	8	88.9	197
		207		16		9		232

TABLE 5.29
Likert #8 Recoded. “This church should grow in membership.”

		<u>Member Type</u>						Total
		Regular Members	Percent	Key Leaders	Percent	Pastors	Percent	
Total	Antigrowth	19	8.3	2	11.1	1	12.5	22
	Progrowth	209	91.7	16	88.9	7	87.5	232
		228		18		8		254

Pastors, key leaders, and regular members value the size of their congregations and the personal relationship they are able to have with the pastor. At the same time, they recognize the need and express a strong desire to grow in size and membership. These values are at odds with each other and are mutually exclusive. If the church is to grow, the

attachment to church size much must be sacrificed. If the church is to stay the same size, the desire for growth must be surrendered. If a personal relationship with the pastor is essential, and vice versa, then how can the church grow and those relationships be maintained?

Something must give. Some of this dynamic is evident in the results in the qualitative interview section of this paper. We also can assume that these responses may reflect the social acceptability in responses—who would say they did not want to grow?

Qualitative Interview Findings

The qualitative interviews look specifically for attitudes, expectations, and insights into the topic of congregational numerical growth, and how attitudes and expectations may play a role in the issue of congregational numerical size limitations. Qualitative interviews with seven pastors and five focus groups were completed over the two-month period of August and September 2006. The pastor interviews included pastors from seven of the 10 identified congregations. These were done over the telephone, recorded, and transcribed. From those interviews, the pastor gave names of four key leaders from each of their congregations. Interviews with key leaders included two of the four given names in a telephone conference call interview. These were also recorded and transcribed. A summarization of these results follows, taking each of the ten questions in the order asked.

Question One:

“Are you currently satisfied with the numerical size of this congregation?”

Pastors answered this question with a resounding ‘no’ with only one exception. One pastor simply said, “Yes.” The other six, however, indicated either a strong desire and expressed need to grow, or at least dissatisfaction with the current congregation’s size and a willingness to grow. Some of their comments were,

- “...we need to grow...,”
- “I would hope that the church would grow,”
- “...this congregation is ready to function at a larger size...,”
- “It’s not my highest priority, but I certainly would be happier to see more...”

The reasons given by pastors for the dissatisfaction of size and need to grow were varied. Some of the reasons seemed to be about basic survival,

- “...not only are we called to grow...we have to strive to grow...we can’t just exist...also if we don’t do anything we’re falling backwards.”
- “...I think it’s important in terms of our viability long-term that we get bigger.”

Some comments reflected practicality,

- “We’ve got room to grow...,”
- “We’ve got good things to offer...,”
- “We’ve been full but flat for pretty much 15 years in a growing area.”

Some comments reflect a missional imperative,

- “...I would like to see the church reach out to a broader group of people...,”
- “...we’re supposed to grow, we’re supposed to reach out and include new people.”

The key leaders were less clear about their desire for growth and less clear about the reasons for either desiring growth or not. One pair simply said they were satisfied with the current size. After a long silence, they both responded they liked the size, as though they had never thought about it before. Others were more vocal, indicating either a willingness to grow, or expressing a need to grow. The reasons were not clear. There was much uncertainty among key leaders over the issue of numerical size. Comments were,

- “...I would not be opposed to having it grow.”
- “I like this size...but I know it’s important for us to grow, too.”

- “The congregation is great, but we would love to have more members.”
- “I would say I am satisfied with it (the size), but I believe there is room to grow as well.”

Not much was expressed in the way of a missional imperative among key leaders, but there was talk of survival,

- “...but if you look at it from a financial standpoint we need some more people to help accommodate what we want to do.”

One leader said,

- “I think we should be growing...I wouldn’t say a lot, but it should be a little bit higher than we are now.”

This was typical of the ambivalence expressed by many of the key leaders who felt a need to grow, but could not articulate why or by how much.

Question Two:

“Do you perceive a potential for growth at this congregation?”

Only one of the seven pastors said ‘no’ to this question, due to the location of the congregation and the area traffic and growth patterns as well as proximity to larger ELCA churches. Every other pastor in the group did perceive potential for growth, and generally that perception was based in two places, conditions inside the congregation and conditions outside the congregation. The inside conditions included the recent influx of new leadership and new members, a new spirit or energy or changing culture, the addressing of internal boundaries to growth, and in one case a new building project completed. The outside conditions were cited less often, but included new opportunities in the community, such as a changing demographic, new area construction, and changing traffic patterns and number of unchurched in the area.

Key leaders did not elaborate as much on this question (which is why question three is a follow up to this one), but they were nearly unanimous in their response. They said quite clearly “yes,” they certainly did see potential for growth. Only two comments followed those responses among the six groups, or twelve people. One said, “I work at the school...and I see how the schools are growing and I know that our churches are going to have to grow.” The other comment was, “Yes, but I think we’re getting to the point where, uh, our facility is going to limit that.”

Question Three:
“How do you perceive that potential?”

Most of the pastors responded to this question when they answered the previous one. Three of the seven, however, did elaborate further, describing potential based on what was happening outside their congregations and what impacts it was having on them. One described younger families in the area and therefore seeing new faces on Sunday morning. Another described the growth in the area, new people moving in and new visitors to church. One described the high percentage of unchurched in the area, people moving in, changing demographics (“a lively immigrant community”), and saying, “And so there is a potential for growth and of course the question always is, how does one do that?”

The key leaders, since they were less vocal in the previous question, were able to give more details on this particular question and they tended to agree with the responses of the pastors by identifying both internal and external potential. For external potential they mentioned new growth in housing and business in the area, turnover in housing, and demographic transitions. Internally they pointed to programs offered, efforts at reaching out, the need to realize the untapped potential of human resources, and the appeal of doing ministry well. One leader mentioned the high number of area unchurched and another leader surprisingly brought up one of the main concerns expressed in this thesis: “...what we are

offering is attractive to people. It's just that whether they feel that there's room for them to fit in is our biggest challenge now."

Question Four:

"Have you attempted to grow this congregation?"

Only one pastor said "no" to this question, but he qualified that by explaining his role was not to grow the church but to lay the groundwork for that to happen in the future and to have the congregation have a serious conversation around the issue of mission. They have spent much of their time and energy focusing on self-reflection and mission. This pastor said, "No, I have not attempted to grow the congregation...Raising the question about it, yes."

The other pastors all indicated that not only have they attempted to grow the congregation, but went on to describe a wide array of creative efforts toward that end, including establishing web sites, mailers and postcards, door-to-door evangelism, hosting community dinners, following up on visitors, creating the best possible worship experience, as well as providing quality hospitality, welcoming community groups into their buildings, adding worship services, and experimenting with weekday services. The energy, resources, and focus toward growth and outreach was clearly evident in each of these pastors.

The answers given by the key leaders on this question can be classified in three ways. Two of the groups indicated they were not intentional about growth, but were nonetheless growing (which is not true according to the records, but that is their perception). One of the groups indicated they were doing much to grow, but that a recent meeting with a synod representative had made them aware of their ongoing plateau despite good efforts to grow. And the third response was given by two groups who indicated they were enthusiastically making many good efforts to grow and that their efforts were paying off and they were growing (despite the reality of the plateau). "I think we are all the time (attempting to grow the congregation) . . . and it's growing on a regular basis," said one group member.

Question Five:

“What attempts have you made?”

(This question, similar to question four, is a follow-up question seeking specific details of efforts.)

Again, most of the pastors answered this question when they answered question four. One indicated some of his effort has been in trying to turn his introverted congregation outward. “Mostly it’s been a matter of trying to turn the congregation, which in psychological terms, has been kind of an introverted congregation, trying to turn it outside some.” Those efforts include involvement in the community through mailings, joining the community parade, and advertising events of the church. One pastor indicated he did personal door-to-door campaigning and followed up on each and every visitor in person.

Key leaders were able to describe in detail the many and various efforts the congregation had enlisted to grow the church, including many of the items listed above, such as mailings and advertising, door-to-door campaigns, and door hangers; However, this group was much more inclined to think in terms of what they were doing inside the church already, such as Sunday School, VBS, Rally Sunday, quality youth programs, quality music programs, and good worship. “I think the programs we have for young families, like the Sunday School program and the youth programs are very effective. And I think, um, and I think that a good worship service, you know interesting variety of services, a variety of things are important factors,” is a typical response of the key leaders on this question.

Question Six:

“What has been effective, what has not?”

Pastors indicated they had little confidence in print materials, mailings, and advertising as effective ways to grow the church. There were several comments that the effectiveness of these methods was difficult to measure. In addition, door knocking was seen by a couple pastors as not effective. Ironically, however, one pastor stated that anything that

had to do with personal contact was effective, yet in the very next breath said door knocking was not. Included in the list of things that were effective for growth were worship quality, personal contact, outdoor services, new services with innovative music, visitor follow-up, web site, and allowing outside groups to meet in the church. Among those things listed as not effective were the unwillingness of members to invite others, mailings, advertising, door hangers, and door-to-door campaigning. It is interesting to note that many of the things perceived as effective tend to be those things that happen at the church, and those things considered not effective are those things that happen outside the church, in the community.

Key leaders struggled with this question and were not clear about how to answer this question. They were thoughtful, but many had no answer. Many of them said they didn't know what was effective and what was not. Many of them said it was something that was impossible to measure. When I asked one group that was struggling to name something, "So there is not one thing you can think of that has been effective or not effective?" in unison they both replied, "No." While most did struggle to articulate and answer, four answers did emerge. One of those things named effective was, "the decision to build." Another answer was insightful, "The issue is not attracting people, it's retaining them." Two other answers were, personal invitation and word of mouth.

Question Seven:

"What do you see as the biggest challenge to overcome for growth?"

Pastors were quickly able to identify issues related to this question, however the answers were quite varied. Answers included the following: visibility, architecture, white flight, demographic changes/multi cultural challenges, post-Christendom issues, busy culture with other priorities, no sense of mission, contentment with status quo, resistance to change, back door losses, a Lutheran unwillingness to share faith, proximity to other larger churches, location, location, location (location was mentioned three times by three separate pastors).

While pastors saw big picture issues such as visibility and demographics, and philosophical things, such as post Christendom and mission, key leaders tended to name practical and personal challenges to overcome. They saw things to overcome like, significant understaffing, the need to be more outgoing and inviting, getting people to invite friends, doing a better job of reaching out to the new people and incorporating them into the life of the church, space limitations for worship and school, lack of leadership, and finances. One key leader put the challenge this way, “Who do you invite? Well, you know, nine out of ten of my friends, uh, maybe that’s high, but seven out of ten of my friends are at my church already and uh, two more of them are um, already churched and the tenth is from work. Work is a very fine line. I’m willing to share my life and talk about my faith when it’s appropriate, but you have to be careful, especially at work.” Another put the challenge this way, “You think about different ways of inviting, but I still see people standing around (at our church), new people there and nobody is going up to and talking to them...”

Question Eight

“Has this congregation discussed growth? What was the conclusion?”

Only one of the seven pastors interviewed said “no” to this question. The other six responded with a fairly enthusiastic “yes” and then identified several ways in which the conclusions were being carried out in the life of the congregation. Two pastors said the result of the conversation was around building to accommodate growth, and the result was a new addition to their current buildings. One described ongoing conversations around the topic and several responses, such as changing worship, adding a second service, retreats and cottage meetings to build enthusiasm. One described a two-year assessment with demographic research, consultation with the synod, that resulted in a laundry list of possible things that could be tried. One of the things suggested was doing a better job of publicizing through newspapers and community publications. “There were probably a list of 25 or 30

things that we could try,” said this pastor. One pastor indicated the matter was currently under study and that no conclusions were yet forthcoming. Another pastor said he came into the congregation after it had done some extensive study, but that he was not impressed with what was concluded, that it did not “grab” people. “There are a few people in the congregation who are reasonably committed to having the church grown, but for most people it’s either not what they think about, or don’t see it as a primary mission, which is a typical, mainline, Lutheran, thing. . . Most people think of growth in terms of ‘we need some more people to pay the bills,’ vampire evangelism.”

Key leaders seemed much less conscious of conversations around growth than pastors. Three of the five groups were not aware of any conversations on the topic and two of the five indicated there had been conversations, but were not able to clearly articulate specifics. One said, “I think there is one going on right now and I don’t think any conclusion has been reached.” Another said, “Yea, I think we’ve had discussions, lots of them in that area. And I think, from my perspective, I think the conclusion is always to ahh, to want it to be, how do I say this, more natural. As people felt this was a place for them, then that’s good, but to make people feel, you know, not to put the old pressure on them, not to put the emphasis on, you know, we gotta get more people by hook or crook, whatever it takes to make it happen.” Of the questions thus far, none has resulted in responses so dissimilar between pastors and key leaders as this one. Pastors were much more clear and enthusiastic in their response. Key leaders were not clear at all about how to answer this question.

Question Nine

“How are new visitors and new members treated in this congregation?”

Pastors seem to be very intentional about how new visitors and new members are treated in their congregations. This question drew the most similar and consistent responses, and the most familiar, and emphasized upon processes. All but one of the pastors in the study

described a process, or system of procedures, that included such things as a visitor pad or other method of visitor identification. This visitor identification process is the beginning of a set of follow-up procedures with visitors that includes phone calls, letters, and personal invitations. Pastors seem to be the lead evangelist when it comes to visitors and they do much of the directing and oversight of the processes in place, which are intended to lead visitors eventually to the new member's class. Of all the questions asked in this survey, this was the one where it seems there is the most intentionality and energy among pastors. Potential new members seem to be of critical interest to the pastors in this study, and pastor have an active and direct participation in the process.

Key leaders were much less clear about the processes in place for visitors and much less confident than the pastors when talking about it how it works. They spoke in general terms about what happens with visitors. When responding, many times they had to be prompted by or coached by each other to remember what actually takes place. They did very strongly indicate that their congregations were very good at this and very welcoming. Nearly every group mentioned things like signing a welcome pad or guest book and maybe a visitor's packet. Many of them seemed to indicate that the pastor was the primary person to identify and follow up with visitors and to oversee this area of responsibility.

Question Ten

“How hard is it for new people to assimilate into this community?”

On this question pastors generally felt their congregation was the exception, that theirs truly was a warm, welcoming congregation, open to the full participation of new people. Many admitted, however, that to get involved one had to be motivated. “If they sit on their thumbs they're not going to find an easy natural road,” said one pastor. Nevertheless, for the most part all the pastors interviewed felt theirs was a fully open community, welcoming to anyone interested in becoming a part of the congregation. Some did indicate

there might be certain groups within the congregation that may be exclusive, but that did not mean that the congregation was exclusive. None of the pastors was able to identify any formal pathways of assimilation into the life of the congregation. Assimilation into the congregation was the responsibility of the individual member. “I think if they’re motivated, it’s pretty easy for them, they are welcomed into leadership. But I don’t know about those who are waiting to be asked,” said one pastor.

Key leaders seem to be in agreement with pastors as to the openness of their congregation. They all describe, in much the same way, an open, warm, friendly community where a motivated person can find many opportunities for participation and leadership. “We have people like, like on the church council now, we have some people who have belonged to the church for less than a year that are real involved, you know, serving on the youth board and we have people in our choir that hadn’t officially been accepted as new members yet, or haven’t gone through a, you know, be there on a Sunday when its your turn to join, but they’re singing in the choir and so I don’t think so. Unless you are a person who isolates yourself or something intentionally, but I don’t feel that sense of that, that we have that.”

These interviews reveal a strong commitment of pastors and key leaders of pastoral-sized congregations toward congregational growth. Much of the focus, energy, and resources of these congregations are directed toward reaching and assimilating potential new members. With all this energy and effort and openness toward growth, how is it that each and every one these congregations, with all this sincere effort to reach people, have reached a plateau and do not grow beyond their current size, year after year, even while located in areas of population growth? They seem to work hard at what they do, and they seem to be faithful in doing all the right things, and yet they remain stuck. Why is this so? The following concluding chapter, looks at the issues identified as growth-inhibiting factors revealed through the survey instruments namely, 1) Overwhelming expectations of regular members

that pastors provide all the pastoral care in pastoral-sized congregations rather than develop leaders, and 2) that the personal relationship to the pastor and the single cell-size of the community is a high value. This is in direct conflict with a stated desire and acknowledged need to grow. How to these dynamics become growth-inhibiting factors? How do they contribute to the challenges of mission in assimilating outsiders into the community of faith?

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The major theme of this thesis asks the question, “Is there room in the inn?” When God came into this world, it was under strange circumstances. He was born in the middle of the night, in a strange town, in a stable surrounded by animals. He was laid in a feed trough. His parents were not married. The only witnesses were barn animals, lowly shepherds, and some foreign gentiles. Assuming God could be born anywhere God wanted, why under these particular circumstances? What is God saying to us? We know from the ministry of Jesus and the whole of the biblical narrative that the heart of God burns for those in the margins of life. Throughout the biblical narrative we see God admonishing his people to love and care for orphans, widows, and strangers—the helpless and hapless. Often God’s judgment is delivered based on how well his people attend to those in the margins. Caring for and including people is clearly important to God. We see this as the basis for the *missio dei*, that God’s people would reach out to the whole world with love and compassion, as God has done through his own son, Jesus Christ. With such a missional imperative, why would organizations based on the love of God in Christ not be continually growing? What would hinder them from growing, especially when there are opportunities for growth?

During a time when population growth is high, it would seem to follow that churches should be growing. Despite high population growth however, the ELCA and other mainline denominations have not grown, but rather have actually declined. When the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the call of the Holy Spirit is to proclaim good news to the world, one has to

wonder if there might be something wrong, either with the theology or the ecclesiology of the church. What is going on in mainline congregations that prevents them from realizing the potential to extend the kingdom of God in their own neighborhoods?

Research into this question has been extensive, and most have concluded it is a complex issue with no single causation. I would agree there is no simple explanation or solution to the issue of congregational growth and size-related plateaus. As Alice Mann points out, the causes are “less visible and more cumulative in nature.”¹ The dynamics involved become imbedded in the nature of the congregation and very challenging to overcome. Strong, wise, insightful leadership is needed to overcome the powerful forces of resistance that developed in Christian congregations. We need to try to identify what we are up against, otherwise we spend our energy and resources in vain. One of the dynamics identified by church growth experts is the love affair with single-cell-sized churches known as pastoral-sized congregations of around 125 to 250 per week in worship. Are people so in love with the single-cell size of their faith community and their personal relationship with the pastor that they can acknowledge in one breath the need to grow, while at the same time be unconsciously working to keep the congregation the size it is, despite great efforts to grow? The qualitative and quantitative results of this study show that Lutherans in pastoral-sized congregations love to know the pastor personally, love the size of their congregation, and yet acknowledge they should grow in size. Are there unspoken messages being sent to certain members and visitors that says, ‘you are not really welcome here?’ ‘You don’t fit in with us?’ ‘We are looking for someone else?’ ‘We are full?’ Roy Oswald reminds us that churches make an unconscious choice not to grow because what will be lost is ready access to the

¹ Alice Mann, *Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-to-Program Size Transition* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 10.

pastor and the feeling of oneness as a single-cell congregation where everyone knows each other.² Kenneth Crow describes this dynamic as a “choice point.”

Similarly, at around one hundred and fifty the members and pastors of congregations reach a choice-point where they may decide to retain valued relationship patterns and organizational approaches or to change them in order to become a different type of organization. This choice is also evidently not merely a matter of overcoming spiritual and organizational barriers. . . . The conceptual framework of “choice-points” should not be understood to imply that congregations usually make overt, formal decisions at these points. In fact, most are probably informal decisions that are nevertheless widely accepted and firmly held. Once these decisions are made, congregations appear to cycle up and down within the range allowed by the organizational issues of the choice-point. They tend to effectively prevent or replace losses that would move them below the chosen range and resist additions that would move them significantly above that range.³

What Crow describes here is precisely how homeostasis works in system theory. A congregation becoming fixed into rigid, change-resistant relationships is problematic, particularly when it comes to growth.

Indeed, an organization cannot grow if the homeostatic forces are totally in charge. Growth means that the system must accommodate newcomers, new patterns must develop as numbers increase, new adaptation must be made to changing environments, new agreements must be made as new personalities enter the system.⁴

As documented in the literature review of this thesis, there is growing evidence that 150 people is the optimum size and social capacity of human community. After 150 the feeling of oneness begins to get lost and access to the pastor becomes limited. At this point, in order for the congregation to continue to minister to growing numbers of people it must accept some significant levels of change—particularly in attitudes and expectations around how pastoral care is given and received. This study shows that plateaued pastoral-sized

² Roy M. Oswald, *Making Your Church More Inviting: A Step-by-Step Guide for in-Church Training* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1992), 52.

³ Kenneth Crow, “A Network of Congregations: Congregation Size in the Church of the Nazarene,” Research Center, Church of the Nazarene, October 5, 2004, <http://media.premierstudios.com/Nazarene/docs/NetworkCongregations.pdf> (accessed January 2007), 2.

⁴ George Parsons and Speed B. Leas, *Understanding Your Congregation As a System* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1994), 7.

congregations in growing population areas have a very high expectation that the pastor will continue to be the primary source of pastoral care. The pastor is expected to visit shut ins, attend wedding receptions, call on prospective members, visit the bereaved, visit the sick, give pastoral counseling, call on parishioners, and attend youth activities—all of this while preaching, teaching, and administering the congregation and maintaining a personal relationship with a growing number of people. As a congregation grows, so do the demands upon the pastor and his/her time and energy. Unless expectations and attitudes about the role of the pastor change there will be little change. The social capacity of the congregation will be reached and the congregations will be unable to accommodate more people. The sociological, pastoral capacities of the congregation becomes maximized and anyone wanting or needing to become a part of the congregation may be welcome in theory, but in a sense they will be told they will have to stay in the stable with the animals—because all the best places are taken.

System theory teaches that a system in stress seeks homeostasis—to live within its means and capabilities. A congregation that values the feeling of single-cell oneness and personal connection with the pastor will experience stress when the Sunday worship attendance reaches 150 per Sunday and higher. At this point, unless something changes—particularly expectations and attitudes of the pastor, key leaders, and regular members around their relationship to the pastor and each other—then forces of homeostasis will actively work to keep the congregation at that size. System stress will force the congregation to work within its current structural and leadership capacities. Congregation capacity for size has more to do with structural capacity and leadership practices than numbers of people alone. This is the point at which the pastoral congregation reaches its sociological capacity and either outsiders are no longer able to find room in the congregation, or certain current members do not get

their needs met and drift away. The congregation has reached its capacity. There is no room in the inn.

A congregation that has reached this capacity will need to ask itself hard questions. Do we value being this size and having access to the pastor so much that we want to remain this size? On the other hand, are we willing to sacrifice those values for the sake of reaching others? A congregation that chooses not to let go of the love of size and love of pastor, will run the risk of becoming an isolated system. It can maintain itself over a time, but it will have exhausted its capacity for change and lost its missional calling, and in the end may become what Michael Goheen calls “church as a self-preserving, self-serving body. . . , (a church with) a separate understanding of church and mission . . .” and/or “. . . the failure of the church to be a summoning community.”⁵ In systems theory this is referred to as a closed system, no longer effectively interacting with the outside world, unable to import new energies, ideas, or resources. Such a closed system as a limited life expectancy and will eventually expend its internal energy and die. There may be valid reasons for a church approaching the “choice-point” of 150 to 250 in worship to remain one size in order to accomplish God’s will in their setting, but there must be some acknowledgement of the exclusive reality this size church creates and consider ways they could participate in creating more churches rather than choosing to become an ever larger congregation.

Congregations not focused on or driven by the *missio Dei* run the risk of becoming irrelevant to their communities, turned in on themselves, and self-serving. An anecdotal analogy of this dynamic is the story of the quilting group at one Lutheran congregation. They had gathered weekly for years and had formed into a tightly knit clique. Others were welcome in the group, but in practice, they were relegated to sit in the margins of the group

⁵ Michael W. Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology" (Ph. D. diss, Boekencentrum, University of Utrecht, 2000), 358, 360, 362, 363, 364.

and expected to be quiet. Their pastor came to them and was concerned about the needs of a third-world country. He told them they needed bandages. He carried out a used bed-sheet drive and gathered sheets to be stripped and rolled into bandages. He asked the quilting group if they would suspend their quilting for a short time to strip and roll bandages instead. The leader of the quilting group came to the pastor and said, “We don’t want to roll bandages, we want to make quilts. That’s what we like to do.” Therefore, they refused the call. Not to pick on the quilters, but this becomes a good analogy for the church to consider. Do we become so enamored in what we like to do, of what we are used to doing, so much so that we refuse to change what we do, even when it is no longer relevant or needed? Do we ignore pressing needs around us because we like what we do, even though it no longer addresses the pressing needs around us?

Mission is understood in its best sense as ‘sending’—sending out into the nations for the purpose of testifying to the gospel. In mission, the church is called beyond itself into the local environment of humanity to bring good news of salvation and deliverance. As Jesus himself was often tempted, do congregations concern themselves with the needs of the 99, or do they seek the lost one? Clearly, for Christ the one is a high priority. How do our congregations reflect this value in ecclesiology, theology, and practice?

One of the key leaders during the qualitative interviews made my point for me when she answered the question “How do you perceive that potential (for growth)?” She said, “. . . what we are offering is attractive to people. It’s just that whether they feel that there is room for them to fit in is our biggest challenge now.” Indeed, this is the biggest challenge for the church, to create room for others to fit in.

The significance for discovering and understanding what limits congregations from growing is essential if we are to be useful to God in reaching and serving people in the margins of our world. The theory of size plateau in congregations has been written and

reflected upon extensively, but it does not seem to have been tested scientifically. My research is an effort to explore the matter in a scientific way to identify issues of growth limitation for further reflection and study. Before we can overcome our limitations, we must understand what they are. I believe this study has been useful in helping to identify a major issue in congregation growth limitation, namely that pastoral-sized congregations are limited by 1) the expectation that members know the pastor personally and 2) that the pastor is the primary giver of pastoral care. Along with the pastor as the bottle-neck for growth in pastoral-sized congregations, there is also 3) the strong affection for the single-cell size of these congregations. Furthermore, both instruments, Qual and Quan, as well as all three groups, pastors, key leaders, and regular member identified in this study depict a strong commitment and multiple efforts toward congregational outreach and growth. Regardless of their efforts of outreach and evangelism however, the congregations studied continue to be plateaued in size over a period of at least 15 years in areas of growing population. For congregations in these circumstances, this study might be useful in realizing and overcoming the issues at stake. Pastors, key leaders, and regular members, rather than simply working harder and harder to grow while remaining the same size, can begin to address the some of the root causes of size limitations—namely their expectations around pastoral care and how it is given and received; their need to be close to the pastor; and their dilemma of both wanting to grow and wanting to stay the same.

Research Conclusions

The hypothesis of this research is: Congregations are systems with limited social capacity. When the sociological capacity of a congregation has been reached, a new ecclesiology, new styles of leadership, and new opportunities for participation must be created or growth is limited by the existing structures in place. Those limiting structures

prevent growth from happening, excluding outsiders from participating. Congregations that reach their system capacity and reform themselves to allow for growth can grow, so long as there are environmental opportunities for such growth. Congregations that have potential for growth, but do not attend to systemic capacities for growth, can become self-serving, closed communities.

The results of the Oswald Survey questions clearly depict a difference between pastors and regular members when it comes to expectations around pastoral duties and activities. There is statistically significant difference in four of the eight questions asked, primarily related to pastoral care ministry. Regular members expect pastors to give pastoral care to individual members when given the choice between that and leadership development. This expectation must be a source of tension within the congregation as the congregation grows. How can a single pastor meet the individual needs of the members and tend to the ever-increasing need for leadership development and growth accommodation? Simply said, both cannot happen. One must become a priority. Leaders who choose to tend to individual needs of members limit the size of their congregation and consequently the congregation's capacity for mission. For congregations in settings where the potential for growth is non-existent this may be the best choice. However, for congregations where there is potential for growth, this is a choice that may turn the congregation in on itself and create a closed system that actually excludes potential growth. Leaders in congregations with potential for local mission and congregational numerical growth must not let member expectations set the agenda. Christ never let the crowds and their individual ongoing needs dictate the mission of proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples.

The Likert Scale questions reveal a high enthusiasm for the church size, the relationship with the pastor, as well as the need for continued numerical growth in members. While no statistically significant difference exists between the three groups, they do all

overwhelmingly agree they like the church size, they like the personal relationship with the pastor, and at the same time know they need to grow and work hard to do so. Again, how is this possible? Something must give. Congregations with the potential for growth must surrender the attachment to size and pastoral connection for the sake of mission. Pastors must also learn to give away ministry, train leaders, and develop new expectations about how pastoral care is given and received. Otherwise, the church reaches capacity and becomes a self-serving organization that excludes outsiders.

The qualitative interviews depict pastors and key leaders as enthusiastic about growth and extremely purposeful about reaching out to new members. The energy and intentionality for outreach seemed consistent among all the congregations interviewed. These are congregations working hard to grow. Many of them also did feel they were growing despite the fact that all these congregations had been on a plateau for fifteen years. The perception that the church was actually growing was particularly evident among the key leaders. Their perception was that new people were coming into the church regularly and that the church was growing and thriving. What they did not seem to be aware of is the level of inactivity, lack of participation, and the drifting away of current members. Only a small percentage of new members were connecting in a meaningful way in the life of the congregations, and consequently this reality was keeping their church at a plateau. People may indeed be coming in, but people failing to make a meaningful connection to the congregation are also drifting away at the same rate.

Pastors were clearly the main evangelists among the three groups studied. Key leaders and regular members were far less involved in reaching new people. This suggests, again, the role of pastor being the main one relating to members in the congregation of this size. Unless others take the lead in creating relationships and involving people in the congregation, the sociological space limitations are maximized because the pastor can only

handle so many relationships with members. Pastors as leaders in these settings must resist the temptation to be all things to all people, and instead spend their valuable time and energy to train, equip, and empower leaders in the church to be evangelists and to provide pastoral care—to help each take an active role in creating and proving Christian sociological space. This must become the new focus of pastors in this size church to accommodate growth. Pastors must begin to move toward “B” activities and training disciples to take care of “A” activities. The pastor must move from being pastor to the members, to being pastor to disciples who minister to members.

The use of systems theory as a theoretical framework for understanding the challenges of growth limitations is particularly useful for understanding the dynamics at work in congregational growth plateaus. Viewing the congregation as a system with sociological size capacity limitations provides a paradigm useful for understanding, diagnosing, and addressing the challenges we face. Knowing what you are up against is half the battle. At least at this point congregations can begin to acknowledge where they are and they can begin to make a decision about where they want to go instead of laboring under the delusion that they are growing and vibrant. Congregations can come to the discussion honestly about what they want to do—remain the size they are, or change and grow. This is not an easy decision, but one that ought to be carefully considered because it comes with a price. Lyle Schaller calls this “The Big Tradeoff.”

One difficulty in mobilizing the will to change is that it almost always requires a tradeoff. The heart of this tradeoff is that the effort to reach and serve new people will replace taking care of today’s members as the number-one priority in the allocation of scarce resources.

“Why can’t we do both?” becomes the most frequently expressed objection to that tradeoff. One explanation is that the resources to do both rarely are available. A more subtle explanation is that there is room for only one priority at the top of the current action agenda. In many churches the option of “both” is not available because they are contradictory goals. How can we change the nature of the Sunday morning worship experience and still keep it the same? How can we expand the total ministry

without increasing the level of complexity? How can we bring in new people without increasing the size of the crowd?

In other words, the price of moving up off the plateau in size usually requires a willingness to pay the price of change. It means a change from doing yesterday over again only better, to an intentional venture into new territory. The goalless drifting that is a characteristic of too many congregations on a comfortable plateau in size must be replaced by vision, intentionality, a venturesome spirit, and the will to pioneer new approaches to ministry. Rarely does this “just happen.” Usually it is the product of visionary and initiating leadership.⁶

The system must evaluate itself and make a vital decision about mission and leadership. If for the sake of mission the system can acknowledge that it has reached capacity and must make some fundamental changes, then a new system can be envisioned that would allow for greater capacity for mission and growth. What that would entail is pastoral leadership that understands the systematic changes necessary and the ability to lead those changes. It would take courage and the will to redefine the pastoral role to move from primary pastoral caregiver to the developer of pastoral caregivers—a move from “A” functions to “B” functions as depicted in the Oswald Survey. The pastor would move from disciple to apostle in that instead of attempting to personally be Christ to everybody in the system, he/she calls and leads others to be Christ to others, to provide pastoral care, to create room in the inn. Consequently, the pastor multiplies himself/herself and thereby multiplies the capacity of the system. Unless this fundamental shift in leadership is accepted and accomplished, the forces of homeostasis will return the system to previous patterns of operations. Unless the leaders of the congregation can break through and transform the expectations and the attitudes imbedded in the congregation, particularly around the role of the pastor and how pastoral care is given and received, the chances are the congregation will be destined to remain the size it is, and over time eventually diminish.

⁶ Lyle E. Schaller, *44 Steps up off the Plateau* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 58-59.

One important question this study raises is the role of the pastor as leader of the congregation. The Oswald Survey shows an overwhelming expectation by regular members that the pastor of pastor-sized congregations provide pastoral care to individuals in every circumstance. I personally have experienced these kinds of expectations in my ministry. In my current call, for example, I am the only pastor in a congregation of 2,000 members and I find daily here the expectation that I provide visitation to the sick, counseling to individuals and couples, participate in youth activities, and all the other “A” activities defined in the Oswald Survey. How is it the pastoral office came to be defined as the “the primary giver of pastoral care?” Would it make more sense that pastors be the primary caller and equipper and sender of pastoral caregivers? Rather than attempting to do the entire ministry ourselves, should we be resisting this expectation and instead be calling people to the work they are gifted and called by God to do? Should our seminaries teach us not only to provide pastoral care, but also to teach leaders to teach others to provide it? By doing all the pastoral care themselves, pastors rob the laity of their God-given calling. Have we enabled the professionalizing of work that was never intended to be professionalized? Furthermore, if we were successful in making pastoral caregivers of key leaders and regular members, would that not create a great deal of capacity for sociological space in the congregation? Our members would move from being consumers of pastors and pastoral care, to providers of pastoral care which would be more consistent with our theology, namely the priesthood of all believers.

This study is an attempt to explore sociological phenomenon in pastoral-sized congregations. It does not find conclusive evidence, but it affirms there are statistically significant differences that exist between pastors, key leaders, and regular members when it comes to expectations around the role and duties of the pastor. Those expectations likely play an important role in the homeostatic dynamics at work in congregations of this size. While

the study includes only 10 congregations in one synod of one denomination, the findings were consistent between congregations. Furthermore, this study tests and affirms theories in contemporary literature related to church plateau issues. The essence of the issue comes down to the matter of leadership. Will the pastor allow the expectations of congregational members to define the work of the pastor and the mission of the church? Alternatively, will the mission define the pastor and the role of the congregation in mission? In the first case, you will tend to find congregations that have reached their missional capacity. This is not to say these congregations are not serving God or are not providing good ministry. On the contrary, often these are congregations that are vital and active and offering many good ministries. Their capacity to grow, their capacity to assimilate new people and new ministries, however, is severely limited by the capacities of the one pastor and an ecclesiology centered around that role.

It would be interesting and useful to do additional research to validate these findings. One such study could examine the transformation that takes place when moving from the pastoral-sized congregation to the program-sized congregation. I had originally intended to compare and contrast the differences in leadership, attitudes, and expectations between plateaued pastoral-sized congregations with those that had recently grown into program-sized congregations. I changed direction, as I mentioned earlier, when I discovered not a single congregation in the MAS had made this growth transition in the years between 1998 and 2005. At this point, I decided to focus on the issues related to growth limitations in pastoral-sized congregations. I still feel it would be valuable to compare the differences between the two church size types to see if there really is a change in attitude and expectation around the role of the pastor and the feelings about size and growth. It would be interesting to see if there were growing levels of leadership and changes in expectations about how pastoral care

is given and received. It would be interesting to study how people in the program-sized and larger congregations feel about the size of their church and relationship with the pastor.

Another interesting study would be a qualitative interview of pastors who have grown congregations through several plateau points and have them describe the ways they have had to redefine their leadership and role in the congregation. A qualitative survey of their congregations could measure the experiences of members through these transition points. A qualitative interview also with those members who endured those transition points could be very insightful.

Finally, a study of those who join a pastoral-sized congregations but then drift away would be interesting. It would be useful to understand what happens with these people in their relationship to the congregation. Why did they begin to lose interest? Why did they fail to make a meaningful connection to the congregation? It would be good to identify a pathology of membership drift and develop useful and practical interventions.

EPILOGUE

When the brochure arrived in my mail announcing a new program for congregational mission and leadership, it went directly into the recycling bin. I was, at the time, serving a mission congregation I had developed. My wife and I were raising four small children. I was serving as chair of the Mission Table of the Minneapolis Area Synod. I had my hands full. The idea of pursuing a degree was out of the question.

About 15 minutes after putting the brochure in the recycling bin, I pulled it out and read it more carefully. Just for kicks, I took it home and told my wife about it. Certainly she would dismiss the idea. I was surprised when she thought it sounded like a good idea. Still not convinced, I spoke to colleagues and people I trusted to talk me out of it. Again, I was affirmed and encouraged. What I could not come to terms with was why would I do this? What would be the point? Was it for the title? Was it for my career, and if so, what would that mean exactly? Why? My brother-in-law, the Rev. Dr. John Bucka, who happens to be a Lutheran pastor with an M.Div. from Princeton, provided the answer. He said, "It will help you understand why you do what you do and it will help you do it better." That was all I needed to hear. I enrolled and was accepted into the first cohort at Luther Seminary. We were the first group to encounter Professor Craig Van Gelder and his strange ideas about mission and leadership.

As with every educational process I have ever endured, I have been transformed in meaningful ways over the last five years. This has not been an easy process by any means, but it has been well worth the effort. Personally, I have been deeply enriched with a clearer

sense of myself, a better mind, and a broader perspective on everything. Education stretches you and forces you to think better by challenging your assumptions and perspectives and biases. I am less ignorant than I was and I am better able to articulate what I believe to be true without relying on half-truths and assumptions. I take fewer things for granted and fewer things at face value. Consequently, I feel I have a better sense of what is true than I did before. Along with all this book learning, I have also found a deeper sense of humility in the process. The larger my circle of knowledge grows, so grows the parameter of my ignorance. The more I come to know, the more I realize how much there is to know, and how much I don't know, and how much I'll never know. This is deeply humbling (especially for a recovering know-it-all).

Professionally, I have found my sermons are better, more theologically sound, and more succinct. Professionally, I have a much clearer sense of who I am and what my role is in the congregation as a pastor. Near to the end of this course, I took a new call as an associate pastor in a large congregation. I was tired and needed fewer demands on my time. I saw this call as an opportunity that would allow me to focus in areas of outreach, evangelism and mission—all areas of my work in this course. I also thought it would allow me to work a little less hard. I forgot what a sense of humor God has. In the first year of this call, three full-time staff members resigned, and then finally the senior pastor resigned after accusations of inappropriate behavior. I found myself thrust into a situation conflicted beyond belief. It was my work in this course, I believe, that helped me to maintain a professional, healthy, sense of self-differentiation. I did not get caught up in the dysfunctional mess, but at the same time was able to provide pastoral care and leadership to a congregation in a time of deep distress. I have to say I truly have come to a clear understanding of my calling and my role. As my brother-in-law promised, I have come to understand why I do what I do, and I do it better.

In relation to my ministry, aside from what is shared above about preaching better, teaching better, thinking better, I will say I am more committed than ever to focusing the efforts of the congregations to be aware of closed-system dynamics at work in human community and to find creative ways to involve and assimilate new people, outsiders, and those in the margins. We have been regularly working to develop ministries that the care about visitors and guests and that help assimilate people into the life of the congregation. It has been a challenge to our resources, because existing members take so much time and energy. It has been worth the effort however, because as this congregation moves through conflict there has been a vitalizing effect of new membership.

During the months of our highest anxiety, a resignation of a senior pastor, and a volatile meeting with the synod bishop, we welcomed our largest group of new members in recent memory. The giving remained high and worship attendance was constant. I attribute that to keeping our focus on Christ during times of trouble. How I did that as a leader was to constantly direct the congregation's attention toward the margins, where guests and outsiders are made a central focus, where the serious needs of the outside world kept our troubles in perspective.

In this way, the congregations I have served have benefited by my education. My mission congregation benefited by my persistent calls for outreach and reminders to be mindful of the stranger. To this day, they have a team of people who go out faithfully knocking on doors. Built into the DNA of that congregation is an outward focus, beyond the walls of the church building. The assistant to the bishop told me recently he believed that church would always be a church that could minister effectively to those in the margins—because it was a church built by those from the margins. This was a satisfying thing for me to hear.

My work in this D.Min. program was what prompted me to leave this congregation. (I felt there was a terrible irony in this. I was working for a degree in congregational mission and leadership and it was robbing me of energy and will of doing mission and leadership). Not only were my energies depleted, but I also sense that the congregation was in danger of identifying itself too much with me. I truly struggled with this. For the sake of the congregation, I finally concluded my leaving was more important to the congregation than my staying. It was a difficult but proper decision. The church went through difficulties and conflict, but is stronger for it today and is moving ahead now with a new pastor.

My current congregation has benefited in ways identified above. I was able to maintain focus on leading the congregation through difficult times. It was important that I not get triangulated by a dysfunctional system. In maintaining self-differentiation and a clear sense of boundaries, I am able to bring some insight, stability and leadership to a congregation that has long outgrown its current structures and leadership models. Even in the midst of these trials, we have maintained the ministry and even moved ahead with ministry that focuses on visitors and marginal members. It has been a good reminder in the midst of troubles that the ministry goes on, that we have a calling and a mission, and that we cannot allow anything to distract us from what God is calling us to be and to do.

APPENDIX A

OSWALD SURVEY QUESTIONS 1-8 FREQUENCY RESULTS

Oswald question Q. 1

	Oswald Question 1	Frequency	Percent
A	Visit more shut ins	262	79.9
B	Prepare a better sermon	66	20.1
	Total	328	100.0

Oswald question Q. 2

	Oswald Question 2	Frequency	Percent
A	Attend Wedding Reception	106	33.5
B	Go on a retreat with parish staff	210	66.5
	Total	316	100.0

Oswald question Q. 3

	Oswald Question 3	Frequency	Percent
A	Call on a prospective member	240	74.3
B	Conduct training session for church officers	83	25.7
	Total	323	100.0

Oswald question Q. 4

	Oswald Question 4	Frequency	Percent
A	Visit a bereaved family	309	93.6
B	Help two church officers resolve a conflict	21	6.4
	Total	330	100.0

Oswald question Q. 5

	Oswald Question 5	Frequency	Percent
A	Make a hospital call on a fringe member	281	85.7
B	Attend a continuing education event	47	14.3
	Total	328	100.0

Oswald question Q. 6

	Oswald Question 6	Frequency	Percent
A	Give pastoral counseling to members	297	90.8
B	Attend a planning event with officers	30	9.2
	Total	327	100.0

Oswald question Q. 7

	Oswald Question 7	Frequency	Percent
A	Call on parishioner	202	62.3
B	Recruit leaders for parish events	122	37.7
	Total	324	100.0

Oswald question Q.8

	Oswald Question 8	Frequency	Percent
A	Attend an activity with parish youth	300	92.9
B	Critique a meeting with a church officer	23	7.1
	Total	323	100.0

APPENDIX B

TABLES FOR OSWALD QUESTIONS

Table A-1: Oswald Question 1 Post Hoc Multiple Comparison

		(I) Member Type	(J) Member Type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
							Lower	Upper	
Dependent Variable: Oswald Question 1									
Tuk ey HSD	Regula	Key		-.282(*)	.089	.000	-.49	-.07	
		Leader							
		membe r							
			Pastor		-.532(*)	.124	.000	-.83	-.24
		Key	Regula		.282(*)	.089	.000	.07	.49
		Leader	r						
			membe r						
			Pastor		-.250	.150	.219	-.60	.10
		Pastor	Regula		.532(*)	.124	.000	.24	.83
			r						
			membe r						
			Key		.250	.150	.219	-.10	.60
		Leader							

					1		
					9		
Sch	Regula	Key	-.282(*)	.0	.	-.50	-.06
effe	r	Leader		89	0		
	membe				0		
	r				7		
		Pastor	-.532(*)	.1	.	-.84	-.23
				24	0		
					0		
					0		
	Key	Regula	.282(*)	.0	.	.06	.50
	Leader	r		89	0		
		membe			0		
		r			7		
		Pastor	-.250	.1	.	-.62	.12
				50	2		
					5		
					0		
	Pastor	Regula	.532(*)	.1	.	.23	.84
		r		24	0		
		membe			0		
		r			0		
		Key	.250	.1	.	-.12	.62
		Leader		50	2		
					5		
					0		
LSD	Regula	Key	-.282(*)	.0	.	-.46	-.11
	r	Leader		89	0		
	membe				0		
	r				2		

	Pastor	-.532(*)	.1	.	-.78	-.29
			24	0		
				0		
				0		
Key	Regula	.282(*)	.0	.	.11	.46
Leader	r		89	0		
	membe			0		
	r			2		
	Pastor	-.250	.1	.	-.54	.04
			50	0		
				9		
				6		
Pastor	Regula	.532(*)	.1	.	.29	.78
	r		24	0		
	membe			0		
	r			0		
	Key	.250	.1	.	-.04	.54
	Leader		50	0		
				9		
				6		

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table A-2: Oswald Question 5 Post Hoc Multiple Comparison

		(I) Member Type	(J) Member Type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
Dependent Variable: Oswald Question 5								
		(I) Member Type	(J) Member Type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
Tukey HSD	Regular member	Key Leader		-.226(*)	.080	.014	-.41	-.04
		Pastor		-.176	.111	.257	-.44	.09
	Key Leader	Regular member		.226(*)	.080	.014	.04	.41
		Pastor		.050	.134	.926	-.27	.37
	Pastor	Regular member		.176	.111	.257	-.09	.44
		Key Leader		-.050	.134	.926	-.37	.27
Scheffe	Regular member	Key Leader		-.226(*)	.080	.020	-.42	-.03
		Pastor		-.176	.111	.289	-.45	.10
	Key Leader	Regular member		.226(*)	.080	.020	.03	.42
		Pastor		.050	.134	.933	-.28	.38
	Pastor	Regular member		.176	.111	.289	-.10	.45
		Key Leader		-.050	.134	.933	-.38	.28
LSD	Regular member	Key Leader		-.226(*)	.080	.005	-.38	-.07
		Pastor		-.176	.111	.116	-.40	.04
	Key Leader	Regular member		.226(*)	.080	.005	.07	.38
		Pastor		.050	.134	.710	-.21	.31
	Pastor	Regular member		.176	.111	.116	-.04	.40
		Key Leader		-.050	.134	.710	-.31	.21

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table A-3: Oswald Question 6 Post Hoc Multiple Comparison

		(I) Member Type	(J) Member Type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
Dependent Variable: Oswald Question 6								
Tukey HSD	Regular member	Key Leader		-.076	.065	.470	-.23	.08
		Pastor		-.426(*)	.090	.000	-.64	-.21
	Key Leader	Regular member		.076	.065	.470	-.08	.23
		Pastor		-.350(*)	.108	.004	-.61	-.09
	Pastor	Regular member		.426(*)	.090	.000	.21	.64
		Key Leader		.350(*)	.108	.004	.09	.61
Scheffe	Regular member	Key Leader		-.076	.065	.503	-.24	.08
		Pastor		-.426(*)	.090	.000	-.65	-.20
	Key Leader	Regular member		.076	.065	.503	-.08	.24
		Pastor		-.350(*)	.108	.006	-.62	-.08
	Pastor	Regular member		.426(*)	.090	.000	.20	.65
		Key Leader		.350(*)	.108	.006	.08	.62
LSD	Regular member	Key Leader		-.076	.065	.242	-.20	.05
		Pastor		-.426(*)	.090	.000	-.60	-.25
	Key Leader	Regular member		.076	.065	.242	-.05	.20
		Pastor		-.350(*)	.108	.001	-.56	-.14
	Pastor	Regular member		.426(*)	.090	.000	.25	.60
		Key Leader		.350(*)	.108	.001	.14	.56

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table A-4: Oswald Question 8 Post Hoc Multiple Comparison

		(I) Member Type	(J) Member Type	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower	Upper
Dependent Variable: Oswald Question 8								
Tukey HSD	Regular member	Key Leader		-.092	.059	.262	-.23	.05
		Pastor		-.242(*)	.082	.009	-.43	-.05
	Key Leader	Regular member		.092	.059	.262	-.05	.23
		Pastor		-.150	.098	.281	-.38	.08
	Pastor	Regular member		.242(*)	.082	.009	.05	.43
		Key Leader		.150	.098	.281	-.08	.38
Scheffe	Regular member	Key Leader		-.092	.059	.295	-.24	.05
		Pastor		-.242(*)	.082	.013	-.44	-.04
	Key Leader	Regular member		.092	.059	.295	-.05	.24
		Pastor		-.150	.098	.314	-.39	.09
	Pastor	Regular member		.242(*)	.082	.013	.04	.44
		Key Leader		.150	.098	.314	-.09	.39
LSD	Regular member	Key Leader		-.092	.059	.118	-.21	.02
		Pastor		-.242(*)	.082	.003	-.40	-.08
	Key Leader	Regular member		.092	.059	.118	-.02	.21
		Pastor		-.150	.098	.128	-.34	.04
	Pastor	Regular member		.242(*)	.082	.003	.08	.40
		Key Leader		.150	.098	.128	-.04	.34

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

APPENDIX C

KEY LEADER/PASTOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Are you currently satisfied with the numerical size of this congregation?
2. Do you perceive a potential for growth at this congregation?
3. How do you perceive that potential?
4. Have you attempted to grow this congregation?
5. What attempts have you made?
6. What has been effective? What has not?
7. What do you see as the biggest challenge to overcome for growth?
8. Has this congregation discussed growth? What was the conclusion?
9. How are new visitors and new members treated in this congregation?
10. How hard is it for new people to assimilate into this community?

Congregational Survey

(please fill out both sides please)

Please answer the following questions below to the best of your ability. Indicate the strength of your agreement on the scale below.

	<u>Very high Agreement</u>	<u>High Agreement</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Low Agreement</u>	<u>Very Low Agreement</u>	<u>Don't know</u>
1. I prefer the size of this church	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Having a personal relationship with the pastor is essential to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. This church should grow in size	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. There are many ways for new people to get involved here	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. If this church got too big I would consider leaving	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I make certain to greet and welcome visitors and newcomers	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. We do a good job of evangelism and outreach here	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. This church should grow in membership	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. There are many opportunities for leadership here	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. I don't understand why we don't grow	1	2	3	4	5	6

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