

**ABSTRACT**  
**SEASONS OF CHANGE:**  
**NAVIGATING NEW BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS WITHIN**  
**THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

by

Wade Killough

Considering the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace for Separation possibly being enacted at the conclusion of General Conference 2022, every United Methodist congregation must wrestle with who they are, why they are in ministry, and whether they are equally yoked with the denomination. The denomination's stance on human sexuality is only one part of many that must be thoughtfully and prayerfully considered as plans are made for moving forward. Every part is equally important.

The purpose of this project was to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. The reason this project focuses on fruitful best practices is because Jesus stated that an outflow of an abiding relationship with him would be fruit that would give evidence of the holy power of God (John 15:5-8).

The ministry context of this project included seven pastors, three denominational officials, and six laity from United Methodist churches in the continental United States who have left the denomination or have formally initiated the process of leaving the

denomination, within the last 5 years. Each of these churches averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance.

The findings of this project may have relevance for any Christian leader discerning next steps in their ministry and mission. Several major findings emerged based on the data analysis. They are listed here only in summary form: Healthy churches have low tolerance; Denominationalism is not a motivator for vibrant local mission; Leaders influence with integrity; and Biblical leaders address difficulties.

SEASONS OF CHANGE:  
NAVIGATING NEW BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS WITHIN  
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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by  
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“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **NATURE OF THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

“So, what’s going on with the United Methodist Church?”

When asked, this question usually finds its genesis in the tension found in how a local congregation is currently wrestling with the United Methodist official stance on the practice of homosexuality. Is the denomination’s stance on the practice of homosexuality really the cause of our missional drift, apathy, and anxiety? Or, like how a fever points to a deeper physical ailment, does the presenting issue point to something deeper that we are being stirred to address in the denomination? This chapter will introduce the nature of this project and the goal to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved.

#### **Personal Introduction**

I have served as a United Methodist pastor since 1998, when I was 24 years old. In over two decades of ministry serving in a two-point charge while in seminary, being an associate pastor at a large church, solo pastoring a semi-rural congregation, serving a new church as the founding pastor, and serving as a senior pastor at a large church, I have observed that the United Methodist denomination has existed in quiet desperation. A lack of denominational clarity of mission, misalignment of resources for mission, adoption of theological pluralism, and a cumbersome organizational structure have created a denomination of local church members ill-at ease with themselves and their place in the world.

While working on my Master of Divinity degree from a Disciples of Christ seminary from 1998-2002, I poured over many extracurricular readings that addressed evangelism and church growth. I hungered for more than what my seminary offered at the time. I soon discovered George G. Hunter's *Church for the Unchurched*. Hunter's comparison of "apostolic" and "traditionalist" congregations was profound for me. Prior to this reading, I did not fully appreciate that each congregation within the UMC lived out its faith differently in theology and practice. Like McDonald's or Walmart, I thought all United Methodist churches did basically the same thing. With this reading, I discovered a way to articulate the biblical, theological, and organizational tensions I was feeling as I served the local church and experienced life within the denominational system of calling. Hunter's ten distinctive features of apostolic congregations are (*Church* 29, 32):

1. They take a redundant approach to rooting believers and seekers in Scripture - they find as many ways to constantly connect people to the Word as possible!
2. They are disciplined and earnest in prayer and expect and experience God's action in response.
3. They understand, like, and have compassion for lost, unchurched, pre-Christian people.
4. They obey the Great Commission—more as warrant or privilege than mere duty. Indeed, their main business is to make faith possible for unreached people.
5. They have a motivationally sufficient vision for what people, as disciples, can become.
6. They adapt to the language, music, and style of the target population's culture.
7. They labor to involve everyone, believers and seekers, in small groups.

8. They prioritize the involvement of all Christians in lay ministries for which they are gifted.

9. They receive regular pastoral care. They are in regular spiritual conversation with someone who is gifted for shepherding ministry.

10. They engage in many ministries to unchurched non-Christian people.

I wanted to be a part of a local church and denomination defined by these ten characteristics of being apostolic! In contrast, Hunter notes the following features of traditionalist congregations (*Church* 36-41):

1. Some simply want people to “be religious,” not necessarily have a real relationship with God. As long as they claim to believe, almost anything will do.

2. Some want people to “believe like us,” focusing on their particular theological bent.

3. Some want people to “behave like us,” according to their clear and often numerous moral rules.

4. Some want people to have “an experience like ours,” whether emotional or cultural.

5. Some want people to “become like us” culturally...to look, dress and sound like us.

6. Some want people to “be good citizens,” linking patriotism and citizenship with discipleship.

7. Some want churches to “share our politics,” whether peace, pro-life, anti-pornography or other issue.

8. Some want people to “support the denominational Church,” which focuses on perpetuating an organization through membership and financial giving.

9. Some focus on “preparing people for heaven.” Once a person is ready for heaven, not much other discipling is needed.

10. Some have “sacramental goals” for people ... baptism, confirmation and communion for “high” churches, or Bible reading, prayer and other devotional activities for “low” churches.

Using Hunter’s definition of *traditionalist*, I realized that the church I served, the denomination I was submitting myself to, and the seminary I attended were more “traditionalist” in nature than apostolic. Hunter’s description of traditionalist churches upended my understanding of a traditionalist individual being someone who held to the historic tenets of the Christian faith. Hunter’s contrast of traditionalist and apostolic actions opened my eyes. I wanted to know the best practices I could employ to prevent me from becoming traditionalist in the ways Hunter describes. This desire became more prominent as I experienced ministry as a church planter.

In 2007, I moved to Williamson County, northwest of Austin, Texas, to plant a United Methodist congregation. The epicenter of our ministry was 3 miles from the line separating Williamson County and Travis County, home of the state capital. The voters of Williamson County are generally more conservative in their politics and social choices than the voters in Travis County. In researching demographic data and assessing the mission field, I determined that United Methodist churches in this area were proud of the denominational name and what the logo represented to the community. This brand recognition was meaningful to persons who had loyalty to the denomination, were

generally progressive regarding theology in general, yet traditional in the methods of worship. I discerned that utilizing the denominational name and logo as tools to reach people in Williamson County who did not have a saving relationship with Jesus or had dropped out of a faith community would not be beneficial to our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Strong assumptions were associated with being a United Methodist church in this geographic area. Within my mission context, United Methodists were what Hunter would describe as traditionalist in practice, and progressive in theology. Fortunately, my annual conference leadership gave me permission to refrain from leading our marketing and introductions with people with the denominational labels. Instead, we simply shared that we were Rockbridge Church and invited people in our mission field to be a part of a community of faith that believed that God created us for more than we had settled for. In other words, my conference leadership allowed me to break out of a traditionalist mindset to be more apostolic in my approach to church planting.

This one decision played a very important role in the church being able to minister in the community without the increasingly public airing of denominational conflict regarding human sexuality. While other United Methodist churches in the area had to contend more and more with reacting to national or denominational news stories of clergy, conferences, or jurisdictional rebellion to the presenting issues of human sexuality, the church I pastored was able to continue putting energy and effort to reaching as many people as possible with the Good News of Jesus Christ, and growing them into disciples of The Way.

In contrasting the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of a traditionalist approach to ministry with an apostolic approach to ministry, the church I served thrived by striving to be apostolic in thought and practice. While we did not lead with the denominational branding, we were very much United Methodist in our polity and doctrine, including that of human sexuality. We leaned into the whole doctrine of human sexuality and treated everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation, as being persons of sacred worth. In the ten years I served this church plant, I can count on one hand how many times I had a conversation about human sexuality. In membership classes, we would share our connection with the United Methodist Church but the denominational stance on human sexuality rarely became a focal point of discussion.

Since 2017, I have served as the senior pastor of the 150-year-old church where I previously served as an associate pastor from 2000-2004. I arrived after the 2016 General Conference that pushed the denominational clarification on human sexuality to a specially called General Conference in 2019. Since 2017, I have walked alongside self-identified theologically, socially, and politically progressive and conservative church members, along with those who may not know how they would identify themselves regarding their understanding of human sexuality and the denomination.

In 2019, prior to the called General Conference, I led over 300 church members, as well as many members and pastors of other United Methodist churches, through Methodist 101 classes that provided context for the tension the denomination was experiencing regarding human sexuality. In this class, the presenting issue of human sexuality was placed within the framework of who we are as Methodists. We dove into John Wesley's Way of Salvation, how we view the Bible, the role the Book of Discipline

plays in our lives, the United Methodist doctrine of human sexuality, personal holiness and social holiness, and the way we are meant to love God, others, and ourselves. The current conflict over human sexuality, without proper context, makes the presenting issue in the news into idols that we worship.

In preparation for the denomination's General Conference in 2020, the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace for Separation arrived on the scene like a bolt of lightning. This proposal for a new beginning for some and an ending for others appeared to have support across many theological and social spectrums. While the energy behind the proposal for separation appeared to be centered on the denomination's stance on human sexuality, I felt there was more to be discerned than simply the presenting issue of the United Methodist Church's relationship with the LGTBQ community.

Therefore, I walked with my congregation through Methodist 2.0 classes that focused on what a new expression of Methodism might look like for us internally and in the community. In addition to casting vision, leading staff, coming alongside the sick, hurt, and broken-hearted, and forming relationships with people inside and outside the church, my time as senior pastor of this congregation has been spent trying to be discerning and thoughtful in shepherding the church to view the presenting issues of human sexuality in more than a one-dimensional manner. In doing so, the church has become more fruitful in what it means to be the body of Christ.

With the postponement of the 2020 General Conference to August 2022 due to Covid, each local church has an opportunity to immerse itself in the biblical and theological ways that God uses beginnings and endings to accomplish the mission of God. Every member of a United Methodist congregation is being brought to the precipice

of a season of new beginnings and endings. Discernment of what God might be doing through the upcoming season will lead them into a new denominational home, or into a new season of a changed denominational home.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Tim Sensing states, “The more clearly the problem is defined, the more focused the project will be. The problem the project addresses emerges from the ministry context previously described” (712). The problem to be addressed in this ministry transformation project is that in light of the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace for Separation possibly being enacted at the conclusion of General Conference 2022, every congregation must wrestle with who they are, why they are in ministry, and whether they are equally yoked with the denomination. The denomination’s stance on human sexuality is only one part of many that must be thoughtfully and prayerfully considered as plans are made for moving forward. Every part is equally important. A path forward with best practices must be provided to aid pastors, lay leaders, and denominational officials through this upcoming season of new beginnings and endings.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project was to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. The reason this project focuses on *fruitful* best practices is because Jesus stated that an outflow of an abiding relationship with him would be fruit that would give evidence of the holy power of God.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in

me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:5-8 NIV)

In the Old Testament, God blessed Israel and set them apart in order to bless the nations. In response to Israel's rebellion, God asked, "How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?" (Jer. 2:21). As Jesus described himself as the source of all spiritual life for God's people as the Vine, many of the hearers were familiar with the prophet's words of warning.

For a fruitful life, pruning must happen. Failure to depend on Christ brings loss of spiritual life. Branches disconnected from the Vine die. For God's people, new beginnings through the Vine are accompanied by the death, or endings, of allegiances, relationships, and beliefs brought under the care of the Master Gardener. The Father's glory is found in the believer bearing the most fruit possible through connection to the Vine. Anything disconnected from the Vine, even if it looks healthy, will not bear fruit that glorifies God or blesses others.

### **Research Questions**

Three questions evaluated best practices. Reviewing relevant literature led to the development of the research questions, the instruments used in research, and the evaluation of the results. Research Question #1 explores positive experiences and learnings from transitions that have gone well. Research Question #2 explores the barriers experienced by churches in denominational changes. Research Question #3 explores the contrasts of healthy and destructive experiences of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination.

**Research Question #1**

What practices or decisions make the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination fruitful for all involved?

**Research Question #2**

What practices or decisions make the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination destructive for all involved?

**Research Question #3**

What can be learned by studying the contrasts between fruitful and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination?

**Rationale for the Project**

First, this study matters because the Church is the body of Christ, and any potential disruption in the Church can be seen by many as counterintuitive and counterproductive. The writings of Paul reveal that the body of Christ is the Church where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus the Messiah. They are partnered with God in continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit apportions each member of the Church with spiritual gifts for the common good (Rom. 12:1-11). Self-determination of each part of the body of Christ, at the expense of the whole, is seen as antithetical to the purposes of God (Rom. 12:12-31).

Second, this study matters because God uses seasons of beginnings and endings in the body of Christ to fulfill divine purposes, even when Romans 12 is considered. Here are three examples: Abraham proposed to Lot that they go their own ways so that they

would not quarrel between them as they lived into what the Lord had provided them for a blessing unto the nations.

So, Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left. (Gen. 13:8-9)

Jesus speaks of fruit that comes from branches remaining on the vine and branches that wither when removed from the vine (John 15:5-8). A healthy vine or tree produces branches that multiply its reach. On the contrary, when a storm or accident splits limbs from a tree, or someone saws the limb off, death will quickly come to that which is separated from the tree or vine. The final example comes from Paul and Barnabas. After a fruitful ministry together through the Holy Spirit, these partners in ministry had a sharp disagreement over mission and personnel (Acts 15:36-41) and went their own ways. This split enabled the ministry of Jesus Christ through Paul and Barnabas to multiply in reaching more people with the Good News. These biblical witnesses reveal that God uses separation, splitting, and branching to accomplish God’s purposes.

Third, this study matters because an essential part of biblical leadership includes being discerning of the movement of God, having difficult conversations with people, and making difficult decisions. Being led by God through the Church, leading God’s people into the mission of God to the world, is taut with tension. It is like stretching a rubber band. The modern United Methodist Church, as a denominational body, appears to be coming apart. Reconciling the goal of divine unity with the reality of human division is difficult. However, the Apostle Paul shares this promise that is held in tension through the leaders whom Christ appoints to the body of Christ,

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. (Eph. 4:1-7)

### **Delimitations**

For this project, I chose to work with one pastor, one lay person, and one annual conference official each from six United Methodist churches in the continental United States who left the denomination or have formally initiated the process of leaving the denomination, within the last four years. Each of these churches averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance. Pastors, lay leaders, and denominational officials of churches that averaged less than 350 in attendance were not included due to the different complexities associated with leading churches based on average attendance..

### **Review of Relevant Literature**

The biblical foundations section includes an analysis of how the complete biblical narrative reveals God's holy character in calling specific people for specific purposes at specific times for the general good. This revelation is personalized in God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, and revealed through the Holy Spirit birthing the Church for a world in need of salvation, healing, and restoration. This section shows evidence of God's initiative, empowerment, and redemption throughout the biblical narrative with particular focus on Abraham, Jesus, God's Spirit, and the early Church in Acts. The theological foundations section explores the theological implications of God's character and calling through the Church to the world. This section also surveys how God has used seasons of beginnings and endings of denominations, with particular focus on those who trace their

heritage to the teachings of John Wesley, to impact the world. The literature review section concludes with a contrast of fruitful and destructive pathways for seasons of new beginnings and endings in organizations.

### **Research Methodology**

The approach to this project was multi-layered. In preparation for conducting semi-structured interviews with pastors, lay leaders, and denominational officials to elicit thorough transitional experiences, several steps were taken first. Preliminary reading and discussions with mentors and coaches led to a literature review. This literature review focused on biblical and theological foundations, as well as organizational theory, that centered on seasons of beginnings and endings. Responses from interviews were analyzed for contrasts between fruitful and destructive outcomes of transition. These outcomes, along with the literature review, provide the foundation for fruitful best practices of leaving the denomination.

### **Type of Research**

This project was a qualitative, pre-intervention study. Participants were asked to share their experiences, ideas, and concerns with leading a church through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination.

### **Participants**

For this project, the researcher chose to work with one pastor, one lay person, and one annual conference official each from six United Methodist churches in the continental United States who left the denomination or have formally initiated the process of leaving the denomination, within the last three years. Each of these churches averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance. “The usefulness of purposeful sampling

lies in selecting ‘information-rich’ cases that can provide depth to your data” (Sensing 2271). The sampling accomplishes this goal.

### **Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews explored experiences, ideas, and concerns with a church leaving the denomination. These interviews provided the opportunity for the researcher to hear perspectives from both clergy and laity.

### **Data Collection**

The design of this project was qualitative in nature. Understanding the mission context of each participant is key to understanding their experiences, “Qualitative research systematically seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (Sensing 1628). This pre-intervention study began by making a list of pastors the researcher knew had officially led their congregations out of the United Methodist denomination, or had formally begun the process. The list was then reviewed and winnowed to meet the delimitations of this project. As names and emails were collected, they were entered into a database (Google Sheets). Email addresses were confirmed as reliable through a test email explaining to the participants that they would soon get an email from the researcher stating the nature of the research with an invitation to be a part of the project. Those indicating a desire to opt out of the research were removed from the list to ensure they received no further communications regarding the study.

A list of the semi-structured interview questions developed in a Google Doc based on the literature review of Chapter 2 formed the basis for designing each section of

questions. Attention was given to constructing a variety of question types so that different experiences were evoked. A draft of the interview questions was then sent to two expert reviewers along with a feedback form and a deadline of one week for giving feedback. This pilot test focused on smoothing out any difficult-to-answer questions and going through the process of collecting data in the Google Docs format.

Once the Institutional Review Board authorized the execution of the study, the participants were contacted via email about scheduling a phone interview through Google Forms. A confirmation email about the phone interview was immediately sent to each participant. A reminder email was sent two days prior to the scheduled phone interview.

At the scheduled time of the interview, the researcher called each participant. Gratitude for participating in the study was shared by the researcher and notation of the participant's confirmation of the interview being recorded was made. The semi-structured interview was conducted, and notes were taken. After 45 minutes, the researcher asked the participant, "Is there anything else you would like to share regarding best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved?" This question ensured the participant would be given the opportunity to share a perspective not touched on earlier in the interview. The researcher closed the interview by asking the participant if a follow-up conversation could take place if needed.

Audio files were transferred to a locked Google Drive folder and the original memory card was stored in a locked file in the researcher's locked office. Each interview was transcribed from the audio recording stored in digital files and saved in a password protected file. Interview notes were stored in a locked file cabinet along with hard copies

of the transcript. Google Drive files were deleted from the audio recorder to ensure that only the researcher had access to them. Any hard copy was kept in a locked file inside a locked office with the key in the sole possession of the researcher. All electronic data was destroyed within one year of the completion of the research project.

### **Data Analysis**

At the conclusion of the interview the researcher processed the interview data. Special attention was given toward learning from contrasts between healthy and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination through the filter of the literature review in Chapter 2. This enabled the findings to be as thorough as possible. Fresh insights were then itemized into a list of best practices for the project findings.

### **Generalizability**

This ministry transformation project was conducted in such a way that other researchers could reproduce this project with other clergy and laity leaders. Based on how semi-structured interviews were conducted, others can analyze the data to develop their own best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. While mission context, denominational heritage, and cultural factors impact the reproducibility of a project, the basic formula for analyzing semi-structured interviews is reproducible.

## **Project Overview**

Chapter 2 explores the biblical foundations of beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. It does so by examining a literature review of theological and historical tensions of continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world through Christ's Church as well as organizational theory and practices of healthy churches and secular organizations. Chapter 3 presents how research was designed to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through seasons of new beginnings and endings. Chapter 4 reveals the results of research and analysis of the gathered information. Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of the research findings for best practices to lead a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition more fruitful for all involved.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter explores the biblical foundations of beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. It also shows the theological and historical tensions of continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world through Christ's Church. Finally, it explores organizational theory and practices of beginnings and endings. The literature review is "a written critical analysis of journal articles, books, and other reference materials that describes the past and current state of information, organizes the literature into topics and documents a need for a proposed study" (Creswell 89).

#### **Biblical Foundations**

The following section shows evidence of God's initiative, empowerment, and redemption throughout the biblical narrative of beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. Special attention on the stories of Abraham and Lot, Jesus, the Holy Spirit birth of the Church, the growing pains of the Church, and Paul and Barnabas provide the biblical foundation for this project. Morna D. Hooker elucidates the strain a researcher applies to employing biblical foundations to contemporary contexts, "the answers which the New Testament scholar gives are not the result of applying objective tests and using precision tools; they are very largely the result of his [or her] own presuppositions and prejudices" (qtd in McKnight and Modica 211). With awareness of the limitations of the researcher, a brief survey of the biblical narrative of seasons of beginnings and endings as part of God's design for creation, including

God's people, will be explored. Seasons are part of God's design and order for creation (Eccles. 3:1-2).

### **Abram, Lot, Decisions, and Consequences**

God's call to Abraham begins immediately with a call to sacrifice what he has known to receive a promise of blessing in order to bless others, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1-2). Abraham listens to the call of God and obeys, "So, Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran" (Gen. 12:4).

By obeying the command of the Lord to leave his country, people, and father's household, Abraham renounces his citizenship, status in his family clan, and the right to his father's ancestral lands. Abraham's obedience is no little thing; it is a test of his trust and faith in God. Abraham's faith evidenced in the Old Testament is celebrated amongst the writings of the New Testament, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). Abraham obeyed the Lord though he could not then see the consequences. In doing so, he experienced the promises of God in this new beginning. Consequently, people unknown to Abraham would be blessed in the future by his obedience. For this to happen, the ending of what Abraham had known had to occur.

Challenges arise as the number of Abraham and Lot's clan and their wealth put a strain on the land in which they travel through, their relationship with one another, and their influence with the people they were to be divine witnesses to (Gen. 13:5-7). To

settle the strain and bring peace to the land, their families, and their neighbors, Abraham demurred to Lot, “Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left” (Gen. 13:9). John Wesley notes the importance of Abraham’s deference to Lot to the indigenous people,

And the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled in the land - This made the quarrel, Very dangerous; if Abram and Lot cannot agree to feed their flocks together, it is well if the common enemy do not come upon them and plunder them both. Very scandalous: No doubt the eyes of all the neighbours were upon them, because of the singularity of their religion, and the extraordinary sanctity they professed; and notice would soon be taken of this quarrel, and improvement made of it to their reproach by the Canaanites and Perizzites. (Wesley Center Online)

Abraham’s choice to follow God is demonstrated through his generosity to Lot. While his position as head of the family would have allowed him to choose the choicest land, Abram instead chose to yield his right to Lot. God’s generosity to Abraham led him to be generous with Lot. This generosity did bring some measure of conflict later among those who told the story of God’s calling on Abraham. Dan Rickett notes, “What makes this potentially troubling for later retellers is the fact that Lot is not part of the promise and therefore neither he nor his descendants are to be dwellers in the land.” The ramifications of this act blessed many generations afterwards and much spiritual fruit was born from it, despite tensions future storytellers would encounter. In contrast, Lot chose the best for himself and settled for comfort. The ramifications of this act were that Lot separated himself from Abraham, Abraham’s God, and God’s blessings on the wider world in the generations that followed Abraham. The Deuteronomist (Deut. 29:17-18) echoes the narrative of Lot’s separation from Abram stating that, “if the Israelites disobey God and violate their covenant with Him they will share the fate of the inhabitants of the cities of the Plain amongst whom Lot chose to live” (Hepner 47).

The story of Lot's decision to leave Abraham for his own self-interest anticipates future strains within the family, such as the separation between Isaac and Ishmael, or Esau and Jacob. It also foreshadows the beginning and ending of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry revealed in the New Testament, as well as church history through to the present age. Abraham and Lot are examples of how intentional rejection of or unintentional indifference to God's mission by a person or group can produce the same results: a person or group misses out on the fruit of a relationship with God and others, and the wider world misses God's blessing.

### **The Incarnation of Jesus**

God's initiative with Abram finds its fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus. Abram is blessed by God in order to be God's blessing to others. In Jesus' incarnation we see the breadth of God's character, love, and initiative, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). God comes into the world God created to redeem creation from sin, shame, and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God blesses God's people with salvation to be an instrument of God's salvation to others. The incarnation is foundational theology for the body of Christ to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch affirm this understanding,

For us the incarnation is an absolutely fundamental doctrine, not just as an irreducible part of the Christian confession, but also as a theological prism through which we view our entire missional task in the world. So, when we talk of incarnational mission, we hope to, in some real way, directly draw inspiration and motivation from that unique act whereby God entered into our world and into the human condition in the person of Jesus Christ.  
(35)

Adherents to historic Christianity affirm that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) who draws all humanity to himself through his sacrificial atonement on the cross. Paul teaches the Christians in Rome that through Christ they have received reconciliation through the initiative love of God (Rom. 5:8-11). The significance of this reconciliation is exponentially magnified in the heart of believers when they receive the power of God's Spirit to share the message of reconciliation with all humanity. The resurrected Christ commanded his disciples to wait for the promise of holy power, to be instruments of God's mission to the world, starting in "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:4b-5, 8).

Like with Abram to Lot, God's generosity to the disciples led the disciples to be generous with their neighbors. Their divine mission to the world was God's mission to them, exemplified in the incarnation of Jesus, "Mission arises from the heart of God himself" (Wright 163). The ramifications of this act blessed many generations afterwards and much spiritual fruit was born from it. However, God's grace-filled mission to the world, through the people he calls to himself through the resurrected Jesus, brings both peace and division, as well as joy and grief. Examples of the impact of Jesus on new beginnings and endings will be explored using selected writings of Luke from his eponymous gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

### **Jesus as the Fulfilment of Prophecy**

Jesus declares that his incarnation (Luke 4:16-10) is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy (Isa. 61:1-2). What Jesus says in the synagogue sets the tone for all that follows in the *Gospel of Luke* and in Luke's account of *Acts of the Apostles*. Jesus is the Messiah

promised by God to save the world through powerful proclamation and healing. Jesus declares that the Kingdom of God is at hand. John Wesley notes,

To proclaim deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised - Here is a beautiful gradation, in comparing the spiritual state of men to the miserable state of those captives, who are not only cast into prison, but, like Zedekiah, had their eyes put out, and were laden and bruised with chains of iron. Isa 61:1. (*Notes on The Gospel According to St Luke Wesley Center Online*)

The Kingdom of God is not only a destination to reside in for eternity after death, but a present reality within the Christian's relationship with Jesus. His declaration, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21), is a powerful tectonic shift in how God's people experience the nature and mission of God. Many experience awe from the gracious words Jesus spoke (Luke 4:22). To accept Jesus' words about himself as true is to accept that God had indeed sent a Savior to those in need of saving.

Others who heard Jesus' declaration that the prophecy from Isaiah was fulfilled in their midst experienced grief from the threat of losing what they had known and understood. Jesus linked God's blessings to those who believed that he was the Messiah. Instead of viewing Jesus' declaration as a fulfillment of prophecy that would lead to new life, they viewed it as a threat that would lead to death, "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff" (Luke 4:28-29).

Jesus is the incarnation of the Living God who draws people to himself for salvation. As people encounter Jesus, they must count the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:28). The incarnation of Christ in a person's life brings both a beginning and an ending,

There can be no turning back, for Christ bars the way. By calling us he has cut us off from all immediacy with the things of the world. He wants to be the center, through him alone all things shall come to pass. He stands between us and God, and for that very reason he stands between us and all other men and things.  
(Bonhoeffer)

Some will consider the cost as a benefit and will experience peace and joy. Others will consider the cost as a liability and will experience despair and grief. However, the blessings and salvation God gives his people are not for their benefit only. As with Abram, God's generosity to the Jews were meant to lead them to be generous with their neighbors. Their divine mission to the world began with God's mission to them. The ramifications of their accepting or rejecting the generous gift of God's blessing would transform their worldview and influence the depth of how far they would go to be a blessing to their neighbors.

### **Jesus as the Cause of Division**

Jesus makes God's transformative peace available to all, but division is certain to result from God's mission to bring this peace through the advent of the Kingdom of God. Beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry result from decisions and commitments to follow Jesus. In his declaration, "I have come to bring fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49), Jesus emphasizes that the disciples' decision to receive or reject God's blessings as a gift of the divine brings holy consequences. In exhorting his disciples to take what he is saying as coming directly from the mouth of the One, "Who, being in very nature, God" (Phil. 2:6), Jesus uses the example of how following him impacts a family, "From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter

against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:52-53).

As God incarnate, Jesus will not settle for indifference or double mindedness from the creation he knit together in the wombs of their mothers (Ps. 139:13), even at the expense of familial relationships. Our allegiance to Christ and willingness to follow him as disciples shape our values and beliefs, which motivate our actions and decisions, and define our influence and impact. “The hardest thing we will ever do is to settle our undivided allegiance to Jesus. It will cost us our idealism, our idolatries, and our ideologies. Until we do, everything about us, including our relationships, will be divided” (Walt).

Jesus admonishes his disciples of the relational consequences of following him that can lead to persecution, and models what it looks like in himself. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb that showed the disciples the cost of receiving God’s blessing in order to be a blessing to the nations (1 Pet. 1:19). Jesus would not be spared the pain and grief of the ending of his life for the disciples to receive the beginning of new life, “I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!” (Luke 12:50). Jesus knew the disciples would experience the severing of multiple relationships because of him. The disciples needed to know what to expect. The disciples also needed to know that Jesus was not expecting them to experience anything he was not willing to experience as God incarnate.

### **Jesus Promises Power**

The entire account of Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles* is the fulfillment of the resurrected Jesus’ promise to his disciples, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit

comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The resurrected Lord’s appearance to the disciples confirms his incarnation, affirms that persecution will not have the final word, and promises that God’s mission to the nations continues. Like Abram, the disciples are blessed in order to bless the nations. Unlike Abram, they will be supernaturally empowered by God’s Spirit to continue “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

The Jews had intentionally rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah, were ignorant of God’s movement in their midst, or were indifferent to anything that might cause them to change what they knew and understood about God (Rom. 11:25-27). Still, God loves his children (Rom. 11:28-29). Through God’s gracious initiative through the working of God’s Spirit in God’s people, the Israelites will be offered the first fruits of restoration and reconciliation. Their redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, will enable them to be a light to the Gentiles in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. God desires them to continue in the relationship their father Abraham had with God and the nations. The movement of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem for the sake of the world is distinctive, “The church begins in Jerusalem with a centripetal mission, attracting people lovingly into its dynamic community, and then expands to Judea and Samaria with a centrifugal mission that boldly ventures into the Gentile world” (Gallagher and Hertig 497).

Acknowledging the power of Jesus to bestow God’s creative Spirit upon his disciples to continue the divine mission comes with an acute need for awareness of contemporary complexities. Cultural experiences and systemic sin must be considered when discussing the biblical foundation of the birth of the body of Christ as God’s plan,

and its mission to the world. Divine power to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world can be corrupted by leaders who distort God's plan for their own gain. Scot McKnight describes eight elements of a power-through-fear culture that are antithetical to Jesus' promise of power (*Help* :

1. Power becomes invested, knowingly or not, intentionally or not, in a single person, the pastor.
2. The pastor's approval becomes the only meaningful approval in the leadership and staff. Remember, that for some people the pastor's approval is God's approval.
3. Those approved by the pastor (and his inner circle of approvers) experience status enhancement. "If the pastor approves me, I must be somebody." In power through fear cultures an inner circle of the approved is formed and those inside know they are special. They are special because they are approved. Hear this: a message of unconditional love by God is thwarted by a pastor who approves of others conditionally. This is nothing less than grooming for the pastor's power. We don't need inner circles in churches who are inner because they've been groomed to be insiders.
4. Power pastors have a blade that cuts on both sides: it provides status enhancement on one side and status diminishment on the other.
5. The power of the pastor and his or her inner circle has become fear-based. Staff and other leaders are now intimidated. This is grooming.
6. Judgments and decisions are made behind closed doors. Insiders know, outsiders don't know, but the ruling reputation remains: our pastor is great, our church is great, let's keep it up.
7. Behind that wall of secrecy lurks a culture that fears status degradation by shaming, humiliating, and re-assigning. This culture is formed through private reporting to the power pastor about what so-and-so said or did. Now everyone is wondering about everyone.
8. The end of the power culture is removal from the toxic culture of power-through-fear, leading very often to guilt (before God, mind you) and humiliation and depression and the impacts of gaslighting.

As biblical foundations of the beginning and ending of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry are considered, the fulfillment of the promise of Jesus' promise of new life would bring death to what the disciples had known. With anticipation of the coming power of God to reach beyond physical borders, the borders of their relationships with others and God would change. The account of Jesus' promise to the disciples does not reveal the personal grief or struggles each disciple experienced as they considered the cost of receiving Holy Spirit power and following Jesus. In order to say yes to God's calling and empowerment to be a light to the nations, they would soon learn they had to say no to something else.

### **The Holy Spirit Births the Church for the World**

God's initiative with Abram to bless him and his descendants to be a blessing to others finds its fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus and the birth of the Church in Acts. Holy Spirit empowerment of the disciples continues the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world to "seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). The ministry entered into is the "ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world" (Seamands 47). While the disciples have been redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Spirit emancipates the disciples from the limits of their natural abilities. The Spirit indwells them with supernatural power to be ambassadors of the Kingdom of God without restraint, first in Jerusalem, and then into the wider world.

The Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1) came 50 days after the offering of the first fruits. God's people knew from the teachings of the Torah that the first fruits were an expression of gratitude to God for divine provision in the harvest, "The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to

give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest” (Lev. 23:9-10). Through this required attendance of God’s people in the temple (Lev. 23:20-21), God unveiled his love for his chosen ones and the wider world in a way never experienced by those gathered.

The presence of wind and fire represent God’s holiness and the inbreaking of heaven (Acts 2:2-3). As the disciples were filled with God’s Spirit, they were blessed to be filled with the loving presence of the Creator through the resurrected Jesus. In turn, they were empowered to be instruments of God’s mission to bless the nations. They were filled in accordance with the promise of the Father, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about” (Acts 1:4). This gift enabled the disciples to supernaturally speak in languages the attendees of the Pentecost festival could understand. This led to curiosity and receptivity, “Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:6-7, 11b-12).

The character of God, revealed completely through Jesus Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8), but God’s people experience him differently. In the crowd that day, some observed the disciples, heard them speak in a language they could understand, and wanted to know more. Others made fun of the disciples and leveled a charge of drunkenness (Acts 2:13). With God’s revelation of the Holy Spirit, some would welcome the invitation to begin a new life by stepping away from what they had known and into a life with Christ in a Christ-centered community. Others would reject the invitation for various reasons known to the hearer. Gibbs clarifies the tension of multiple responses to the movement of the Spirit,

In spite of the scriptural affirmation and accompanying supernatural manifestations, the crowd’s response is mixed with amazement, perplexity,

and outright cynicism. Miraculous phenomena do not guarantee a positive response to God's gracious initiatives. It was so even in the ministry of Christ himself, and it will be no different for his followers. (Gallagher and Hertig 875)

The call of God, through the invitation of Jesus and encouragement of the Holy Spirit, is grace-filled and life-giving, but it comes at a cost. For a new beginning to happen, death of what has been known must occur.

### **The Church Adapts to the Culture**

As the Spirit came upon the disciples and led the Church from Jerusalem to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), tensions of accommodation between Jewish Christians and Gentiles became more and more pronounced. This is most clearly seen in the conflict over circumcision, “Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’” (Acts 15:1).

Uncircumcised Gentile believers were being saved. This was the result of God blessing the disciples in order that they would be a light to the nations. The disciples were continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ and honoring their ancestral father, Abraham, to be a light unto the nations. The tension in the church was not about God's salvation being available to the uncircumcised Gentiles. The Jerusalem Church had decided this was indeed a fact after Peter had shared the conversion story of Cornelius, “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18). “The tension in the church was about how far ethical and social boundaries would be accommodated when sharing table fellowship with impure sinners” (Gallagher and Hertig 162). The rite of circumcision was of central importance to understanding God's

covenantal love (Gen. 17:1-7). God spoke to Abraham of the demonstrable power of this symbol of divine covenant, “You must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:9-10). William H. Willimon reminds the reader, “Adherence to the beloved Torah is the way in which a Jew remains a Jew” (129).

Paul and Barnabas were on the side of accommodating the Gentiles and not placing the yoke of circumcision upon the new believers. As they traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem to address this tension with the leaders of the Jerusalem Church, they shared stories of the Gentiles converting to Christ with Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria. Upon arrival in Jerusalem, they were welcomed and discussions on accommodation began (Acts 15:4b-5). After prayerful deliberations, the apostles and elders determined that a new day was at hand. A letter confirming their deliberations was sent to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. It reads in part,

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.” (Acts 15.28-29)

A season of new beginnings and endings was at hand with the determination that the covenantal practice of circumcision no longer remained part of God’s will as God’s blessing of the nations expanded beyond Jerusalem. As a result, some would define the Church as being faithful to God’s will through accommodation, while others would define the Church as apostate. The accommodation of the church to the mission field

brings about the beginning and ending of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry.

### **Competing Visions of Faithful Leadership Leads to Separation**

Paul and Barnabas were partners in ministry. After Saul was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus and was converted (Acts 9:1-7), he attempted to preach Christ to the Jews in Damascus and was met with astonishment and threats of death (Acts 9:20-25). Upon being hurried away to Jerusalem for his safety by his supporters, the Jerusalem Christians were fearful of him. Amid the Jerusalem disciples, Barnabas came alongside the newly converted Saul to vouch for his encounter with Christ,

When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. (Acts 9:26-27)

Barnabas was also Paul's partner in the first mission out of the Antioch Church (Acts 13:1-3). In addition, Barnabas stood with Paul before the Jerusalem Church regarding the council's decision concerning circumcision with the Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 15:1-2). Together, they shared multiple experiences of God fulfilling the divine promise of holy power to be witnesses for Christ to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The relationship then ended.

At the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council's meeting about circumcision amid the Gentiles (Acts 15:36), Paul and Barnabas were united in their mission to return to communities they had previously been in mission to see how the believers were doing. However, they were not united in how to do it, nor who to do it with. The break in their relationship stemmed from a break in relationship with a third party, John, also called

Mark (Acts 15:37-38). Barnabas wanted to bring Mark on this mission, but Paul did not. Mark had previously deserted them on a mission to the Gentiles. Mark's previous abandonment of mission is viewed as heretical by Paul,

For someone to quit on a mission field previously delineated by the Spirit's instruction (Acts 13:1-4a), and without good excuse, is tantamount to spiritual defection...Paul views John as a defector, an apostate from a mission the Spirit has sanctioned. (Acts 177)

Barnabas and Paul are gifted by the Spirit in different ways for the common good of the body of Christ. The different giftings of Paul and Barnabas from the Spirit led them to view the situation with Mark differently and a season of ministry ended. Acts portrays Paul as bold and zealous (9:27-28; 19:8). Paul's own letters assert his zeal as regarding the law (Phil. 3:6; Gal. 1:14), a zeal that presumably transferred to his Christian faith after his apostolic call. Ronald D. Witherup's simple statement on Paul's personality has a profound impact on the continuation of God's mission, "Maybe Paul's forceful personality began to interfere with the smooth functioning of this dynamic duo" (171). However, two new seasons of ministry began. To strengthen the churches, Barnabas and Mark journeyed to Cyprus, while Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia. More people were reached through this painful multiplying than if Barnabas and Paul had remained together.

### **Summary**

The totality of the biblical witness reveals evidence of God's initiative, empowering, and redeeming of seasons of beginnings and endings among relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. Abram and Lot reveal how living into God's promises results in actions centered on generosity or greed. God's call on Abram impacted the world,

The election of Abraham was explicitly for the blessing of all nations on earth. God's command and promise to Abraham can legitimately, therefore, be called the first Great Commission – "Go...[and] be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:1 – 3). God's plan, then, was to deal with the problem of humanity – sin and division – through Israel, the people of Abraham. (Wright 456)

The incarnation of Jesus is the foundational theology for the body of Christ to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecy that ties the mission of God's people to the world with God's mission to them. Jesus also emphasizes that the disciples' decision to receive or reject God's blessings as a gift of the Divine brings holy consequences. In Jesus' promise of power, the disciples were enabled to continue "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

The Holy Spirit births the church to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. As the Church expands into all the world, tensions of accommodation to culture must be addressed. Paul and Barnabas show how new beginnings and endings occur when competing visions of faithful leadership compete with one another. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, Scripture reveals that seasons of beginnings and endings are part of God's design for creation, including God's people.

### **Theological Foundations**

The literature review began with the biblical foundations of beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. Theological foundations are now examined to unearth frameworks for continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. As Alister E. McGrath explains,

Theology is thus, “discourse about God,” in much the same way as “biology” is discourse about life (Greek: *bios*). If there is only one God, and if that God happens to be “the God of the Christians” (to borrow a phrase from Tertullian), then the nature and scope of theology is relatively well defined: theology is reflection upon the God whom Christians worship and adore. (*Historical 1*)

### **Nature of the Church**

The church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) that encompasses all believers in every location. The United Methodist denomination explicitly defines the nature of the church,

The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ’s own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world. The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world. (Book of Discipline 25)

The origin of the church is found in the trinitarian character of God. Peter affirms that Jesus is, “Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Ben Witherington links the divine creation and purpose of the church, “There is an implicit trinitarianism here, for the assumption is that Father, Son, and Spirit are part of the divine identity, are together in heaven, and are working together to enable God’s people to spread the Gospel” (358). The earliest creeds of the church provided a brief summary of the Christian faith, acted as a filter to recognize deficient versions of the gospel, and united a community of faith, “to the upper room in which Jesus met with his disciples. By putting your faith in Jesus Christ, you have become a member of his body, the church, which uses this creed to express its faith” (McGrath, *I Believe* 6-7). In particular, the

declaration of the early church fathers in the Apostle's Creed unites the nature of the church with the nature of God. Most United Methodist congregations, utilizing the denominational hymnbook, recite this ancient creed in worship services every week (*United Methodist Hymnal* 881).

To be holy is to be set apart for God's purposes and is the work of sanctifying grace. Holiness is one of the defining characteristics of the Wesleyan movement, the ancestral home of the United Methodist denomination. Some theologians believe that sanctification (or holiness) is the Wesleyan stream's great contribution to the Christian conversation (*When the Holy Spirit Comes With Fire* 60). God takes the initial step toward humanity *for* the sake of humanity and justifies believers through the work of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection. God also does his holy work *in* and through the believer personally and through the Spirit-led community of the redeemed. A redeemed community built on the foundation of continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world is a holy church.

The affirmation of the catholic nature of the church places the ultimate ownership of the church in the hands of God, not the denomination or leadership of the local congregation. Local congregations are stewards with one another of the Christian faith and are practitioners with one another of the unifying nature of the church as the body of Christ. God's divine action unites all Christians everywhere under the banner of God's mission. While each congregation will live out ministry differently based on the context of the mission field, the catholic nature and practice of Christians everywhere aligns the community with the timelessness of the acclamation from the Great Thanksgiving

communion liturgy of the denomination: “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again” (*United Methodist Hymnal* 10).

### **Unity and Divisiveness of the Church**

The nature of the Church is centered on the holiness and catholicity of the body of Christ. Because the Church is united as the one body of Christ, division in the body is viewed as counterintuitive and counterproductive. The Church adheres to the promise that the Holy Spirit apportions each member of the body with spiritual gifts for the *common good* (Rom. 12:1-11). Self-determination of each part of the body, at the expense of the whole, is intuitively experienced as antithetical to the purposes of God (Rom. 12:12-31). However, the paradox of the holiness and catholicity of the church is observed when it brings about both unity *and* divisiveness.

Sects develop when conflicting interests arise within a group. For some, the conflict is centered on the level of religious intensity observed by adherents. For others, sects develop because of disagreements over methods of engagement with the mission field. Sects may also develop as the result of resentment of leadership based on experiences when trust is perceived to have been broken. Perhaps a sect also develops because of conflict over cultural values, norms, and mores. The reasons sects arise are numerous and multifaceted.

Because erstwhile monopoly religions inevitably are relatively lax, lazy, and worldly, most of their opposition will come from groups promoting a far more intense faith—from sects, that being the name given to high-intensity religious groups. One reason that a monopoly religion drifts toward laxity is that religious intensity is never transmitted very efficiently from one generation to the next. (Stark 38)

While Methodism is not a religion, application of Rodney Stark’s description of sects can be made toward the denomination. The history of Methodism in America is

replete with examples of beginnings and endings of sects within the denominational family. Within the first 50 years of its existence in the United States, conflict arose over the English organizational structure of the ecclesia and American cultural norms of slavery and race relations. The divisions of the denomination based on these presenting issues found their origin in the conflict over the theological nature of the church. The history of these schisms is an important part of the origin story of the Methodist Church in America,

In 1792, James O’Kelly founded the Republican Methodists to reduce the authority of bishops. Richard Allen (1760-1831), an emancipated slave and Methodist preacher who was mistreated because of his race, left the church and in 1816 organized The African Methodist Episcopal Church. For similar reasons, The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was begun in 1821. In 1830, about 5,000 preachers and laypeople left the denomination because it would not grant representation to the laity or permit the election of presiding elders (district superintendents). This new body was called The Methodist Protestant Church, which in 1939 united with The Methodist Episcopal Church and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, to become The Methodist Church. In 1843, abolitionist preachers Orange Scott and Luther Lee formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church over Methodism’s weakening prohibition against slaveholding. (*Book of Discipline* 15-16)

Seasons of unity and divisiveness within the body of Christ are part of Christian history in general, and specifically within the Wesleyan movement. Discerning how competing sects within the body of Christ align with the divine nature of the church is fraught with competing biblical and theological understandings of social values, norms, and mores. The history of the church reveals the struggles leaders of the church wrestle with in discerning best practices for congregations and the denomination to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the Church and the world.

## **The Question of Why People Need the Church**

In 1990, Adam Hamilton was sent to Kansas City to start a new United Methodist congregation. To guide him, he wrestled with three questions: “Why do people need Christ?”; “Why do people need the church?”; and “Why do people need this particular church?” (15). Hamilton’s three questions helped guide me as I planted a church in 2007. In order to research the theological foundations for the church as it wrestles with denominational tensions today, Hamilton’s question, “Why do people need the church?” will be examined using his six reasons. Doing so provides a framework for addressing the theological nature of the church today as the denomination faces a season of new beginnings and endings. To be clear, Hamilton’s brief descriptions for each reason will not be analyzed for the purposes of this research project. However, his stated reasons will be elaborated on in the context of the season of beginnings and endings the denomination is entering into.

1. The Church as the Continuing Incarnation of the Word
2. The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit
3. The Bible Commands Us to Meet Together to Encourage One Another
4. Christians Can Accomplish Far More Together Than They Can Apart
5. Each Believer is Gifted by the Holy Spirit for the Work of the Church
6. The Church is Essential for Becoming a Deeply Committed Christian  
(Hamilton 23-25)

## **The Church as the Continuing Incarnation of Christ**

In Jesus’ incarnation, Humanity sees the breadth of God’s character, love, and initiative, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God comes into the world God created to redeem creation from sin, shame, and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God blesses God’s people with salvation to be an

instrument of God's salvation to others. The history of the denomination is linked with the incarnation of Christ and

[i]ncludes God's self-revelation and action in history through the call of Abraham, the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, and especially the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God's Word Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (*Book of Discipline* 11)

However, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is divisive in general among Christians. A December 2017 Pew Research Center survey of more than 4,700 U.S. adults finds that one-third of Americans say they do *not* believe in the God of the Bible, but that they do believe there is some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe (*Decline of Christianity*). An August 30, 2020 post on Newsweek's website reveals the uneasiness many Christians have with the incarnation,

52 percent of U.S. adults say they believe Jesus Christ is not God — a belief that contradicts traditional teachings of the Bible through the Christian church, which state Jesus was both man and God. Nearly one-third of evangelicals in the survey agreed that Jesus isn't God, compared to 65 percent who said, "Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God. (Fearnow)

One of the general examination questions asked of all ordinands in the United Methodist denomination is:

Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting and upholding its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, defending it against all doctrines contrary to God's Holy Word, and committing yourself to be accountable with those serving with you, and to the bishop and those who are appointed to supervise your ministry? (Services)

However, many pastors are at odds with their ordination vows to uphold the doctrine of the denomination. The Bishop of the Central Texas Conference shared an experience he had with members of his cabinet,

The district superintendent (DS) is a significant middle-judicatory supervision role in The United Methodist Church which is formally an

extension of the episcopal office. In a discussion bordering upon an argument with other district superintendents, one prominent DS asserted that talk of crucifixion should be jettisoned. She stated, “we have to stop preaching that Jesus died on the cross for us... it does damage to people.” Another agreed and argued further that “here [in communion] should not be any confessional language at all.” He went on to say, “We have to stop making people feel guilty and like they need to confess sins, when they come to church. We aren’t Catholic. (Lowry)

In a report from February 12, 2019, UMNews shared the results of a survey of “Theological Perspectives Among Members” of United Methodist laity in the United States, respondents were asked to self-identify how they would describe their personal theology - 44% identified as Conservative-Traditional, 28% as Moderate-Centrist, and 20% as Progressive-Liberal (Hodges). Ninety-eight percent of Conservative-Traditional laity affirmed the statement “Jesus was the son of God.” Ninety-two percent of Moderate-Centrist and 82% of Progressive-Liberal laity affirmed the same statement. Regarding what provides authority for their personal theology, 41% of Conservative-Traditional cited Holy Scripture, while 6% of Progressive-Liberals noted Holy Scripture. In addition, 30% of Conservative-Traditionals and 4% of Progressive-Liberals agree with the following statement, “The Bible is the Actual Word of God and Should be Taken Literally.”

The Good News renewal movement defines a traditional Methodist as one who believes, “in preserving the heart of our Methodist heritage in doctrine, practice, and spirit. Our core identity ought to be unchanged over the decades. At the same time, we follow the example of our founders in adapting our structure and strategy to fit the changing circumstances in which we live” (Lambrecht). Centrists define themselves in at least ten different types of “taxonomy” as persons who represent “a middle way of sorts within the mainstream of American Christianity” (Knepp). The group Mainstream UMC

clarifies that progressives can be defined in two ways: Incompatibilist and Compatibilist. An Incompatibilist is “only willing to be in a church with others who fully embrace LGBTQ ordination and marriage. Anyone who is against it or unsure should be in a different church. Unwilling to compromise. Offended by Centrists and by the mean-spirited Traditional Plan.” A Compatibilist is “uncomfortable with compromise but is willing to join a broader coalition.” (Holland). Laity and clergy generally have different worldviews, including how they understand the implications of Christ’s incarnation.

When the church is confused about who it is to Whom it belongs, and what it believes, the church loses the divine impact and influence it was meant to have in the world. While the discussions centered around the denominational stance on human sexuality are important and arouse intense feelings, clarity concerning the incarnation of Christ among church leadership needs robust discussion as well. As it stands, the denomination is a house divided against itself regarding an essential creed of the Christian faith. A warning from history is helpful:

Beware the Arian heresy redivivus. Athanasius was exiled five times by four emperors for insisting that the Son is not a creation but is co-eternal with the Father. The Son has no beginning. He is God--not a demigod, not an angel, but the one and only eternal God. Christians have died for this claim. They die for it even today. (Watson)

The church’s activity in the world has its origin in God’s mission through his incarnation in Jesus, not the contemporary theology of denominational or local church leadership. The church’s mission is God’s mission through the incarnated Christ, “God is always the primary Subject and leading Actor in the triune reconciliatory and redemptive work in the world. God’s agency is both active and precedent to human action. God is

Lord of God's mission" (Konz 123). The church is God's idea; Christ is the Head; we follow the Leader.

### **The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit**

Jesus ties the primary purpose for the Holy Spirit with the vocation of the disciples, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26-27). The Spirit will bear witness about Jesus, and the disciples will bear witness about Jesus to the world in response. The early church fathers understood the unique role of the Spirit,

One of the principal roles of the Spirit, "the image of the invisible," is to create spiritual people who faithfully reflect "the Royal Image." How so? By bringing human beings into "fellowship with Himself." Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea, writes, "When a sunbeam falls on a transparent substance, the substance itself becomes brilliant, and radiates light from itself. So too Spirit-bearing souls, illumined by Him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. (qtd. in Hall 1986)

The "Royal Image" is easily marred by sin and the acts of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21), such as hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, and dissensions; factions are the result. In the Apostle Paul's writing to the Christians in Corinth, he sought to address schism in the congregation. Because of their divisive nature, Paul determined that he "could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1). He addresses the folly of aligning with one leader or another in place of Christ as the Head of the church. Paul then focuses on the importance of building their faith on the right foundation of Jesus Christ, as testified to by the Holy Spirit, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will

destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Wesley describes the characteristics of someone who walks in the Spirit as follows:

"A Methodist is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. God is the joy of his heart, and the desire of his soul, which is continually crying, 'Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth whom I desire besides Thee.'" (*Character of a Methodist*)

The alignment of disciples with the work of God through the incarnate Christ is imperative to abundant living (John 10:10). The body of Christ is out of alignment with God when it desires God to change to align with humanity. Human action and divine action work together as the Temple of the Holy Spirit when put in proper order.

Human actions are only mission, in the true and real sense, in and as they correspond to what God the Spirit, sent by the Father and continuing the mission of the Son, is doing; human actions are imbued with real agency only because of the prior and primary agency of God the Spirit. Mission is never "handed over" to human or church agency. Rather, human agency is to be given over to God by walking in the Spirit, obeying and following the leading of the Spirit of Christ. (Konz 343).

The Spirit bears witness about Jesus to his disciples, and the disciples of Jesus Christ bear witness of the Spirit's love and power to the world. As the wind blows wherever it pleases, so it is with everyone born of the Spirit of God (John 3:7-8). However, the Temple of the Holy Spirit experiences difficulty listening to the Holy Spirit because of so many distractions and noise.

For many people, listening to the Holy Spirit is like trying to hear the radio in a busy coffee shop. You can make out the announcer's voice, but you have to strain over the hubbub of the other patrons to make out what she's saying. This is the same situation that exists when you try to listen to the Holy Spirit with too many people or things offering interference. Everything and everyone else must be "turned off." (Frost 57)

God's will for the nations is for the body of Christ to be the Temple of the Holy Spirit, where the church reveals the fruit of alignment with God, "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). While navigating this season of new beginnings and endings within the denomination, every person has an opportunity to evaluate, or reevaluate, their walk in the Spirit that reflects the fruit of God's will. Every person can also ensure they are part of a community of faith that bears the fruit of God's will as a Temple of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Biblical Command to Meet and Encourage One Another**

The writer of Hebrews encourages the Christian community to persevere in their Christian faith through the blood of Jesus. The writer bids the reader to boldly draw near to God without hesitation because of the assurance they have of their standing with God based on Christ's sacrificial atonement. The writer concludes with an appeal to the faithful community to be united with one another (Heb. 10:23-25). A person's walk with Christ is always very personal, but it is never meant to be private. To the Corinthian community, the Apostle Paul describes the divine order of the body of Christ. The Church is made up of many parts interconnected with one another and reliant on the whole, "Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body" (1 Cor. 12:12-15). The members of the community are each uniquely called to live out the faith *in* and *through* the community. Membership disconnected from the whole is not the biblical or theological nature of the church.

People want to participate in a community in organic ways, not strategic (master plan) ways; "people look for a place before purpose, which is to say they seek first to

belong before helping to meet a goal” (Myers 54). The essence of the community is more than the sum of its individual parts. The Apostle employs the metaphor of the body to acknowledge that the community has entered the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. However, the tendency of members of the body of Christ to disconnect from communities of faith has been well documented in Christian history, including within the Methodist movement. John Wesley’s theological understanding of the nature of the church and the sin of humanity led him to note that knowing and growing in Christ could not happen without a community of faith. A faith of isolation is antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus. “Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness” (Leonard 472-473).

People give many reasons why they rebel against the biblical command to meet with, and encourage, one another. A brief description of the different stages of spiritual development helps to uncover some of these reasons. In 1981, James W. Fowler wrote about the seven different stages of faith development through the lens of psychology using chronological age as the beginning point. Progression through these stages of faith is not automatic. Some move more slowly than others from one stage to the next while some remain in earlier stages throughout their adult lives. In all of these, the community plays a key role (201).

1. **Pre-stage: Infancy and Undifferentiated Faith (0-2)** - the strength of trust, autonomy, hope and courage (or their opposites) developed in this phase underlie (or threaten to undermine) all that comes later in faith development (121).

2. **Stage One: Intuitive-Projective Faith (3-7)** - faith is learned through stories, images, feeling, and actions caught from significant adults. The child's imagination plays an important role in this stage of their faith development (131-32).
3. **Stage Two: Mythic-Literal Faith (school aged children)** - the person begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community (149).
4. **Stage Three: Synthetic Conventional Faith (adolescence)** - since self-identity is still developing, there is little independent perspective beyond that of the group to which the person conforms. Faith relies on external authority. Religious institutions 'work best' if they are people with a majority of committed folk best described by stage three (164).
5. **Stage Four: Individuative-Reflective Faith (young adult)** - The individual makes her- or his own judgments about values and beliefs. Previously accepted religious symbols, practices, and Bible stories may be rejected as naïve. Persons at this stage may altogether reject traditional faith of any kind (180).
6. **Stage Five: Conjunctive Faith (midlife)** - Greater acceptance of diversity, complexity, mystery, and paradox is practiced. Previously rejected religious symbols and practices are reaffirmed as tools to help one encounter God and the truth, rather than as merely ends in themselves (185).
7. **Stage 6: Universalizing Faith (extremely rare)** - These persons' perspectives and actions often run counter to the surrounding culture. They see all people as part of a universal family. They selflessly serve others, loving life without being overly attached to life. Many of them are persecuted and martyred in life, but later revered in death (201).

A more recent description of faith development is also helpful. Real-Life

Discipleship ministries describes different stages of faith development (Putman 25). The spiritual dead are characterized by unbelief and rebellion. This idea may be off-putting for some, yet Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the need to be born in the Spirit (John 3:6). Spiritual infants are characterized by their dependance on others and ignorance of the new world they live in through new birth in Christ. Like children in general, spiritual children are characterized by territorialism, mimicking of others they want to be like, and confusion about complexities of faith and relationships. Spiritual young adults are

characterized by a desire to serve others beyond themselves and independence. Spiritual parents are characterized by interdependence and caring for the spiritual development of others to equip the body of Christ to accomplish God's mission.

Each person has different spiritual needs based on the stage of their spiritual development. Every need is met through the body of Christ coming alongside the individual in specific ways. The chart below reveals the importance of the body of Christ in the faith development of the individual (Putman 187-92).

SPIRITUAL STAGE	
Dead	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A secure relationship with a more mature believer</li> <li>• A picture of the real Jesus lived out in front of them</li> <li>• Answers, evidences for Christianity</li> <li>• An explanation of the gospel message</li> <li>• An invitation to receive Christ</li> </ul>
Infant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual attention from a spiritual parent</li> <li>• Protection</li> <li>• A explanation of the truths (new truths) found in the Word of God</li> <li>• An explanation and modeling of the habits of a growing believer</li> </ul>
Child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A spiritual family</li> <li>• Help for how to start feeding themselves</li> <li>• Teaching about who they are in Christ</li> <li>• Teaching about how to have relationship with Christ</li> <li>• Teaching about how to have relationship with other believers</li> <li>• Teaching about appropriate expectations concerning other believers</li> </ul>
Young Adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A place to learn to serve</li> <li>• A spiritual parent who will debrief them about ministry experiences</li> <li>• Ongoing relationships that offer encouragement and accountability</li> <li>• Help for establishing boundaries</li> <li>• Guidance regarding appropriate expectations of people they will serve</li> <li>• Help in identifying their gifts</li> <li>• Skills training</li> </ul>
Parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An ongoing relationship with co-laborers</li> <li>• A church family</li> <li>• Encouragement</li> </ul>

The Bible commands disciples of Jesus Christ to meet together to encourage one another as the body of Christ. Meeting together has personal and public ramifications. When participation with a community of faith is seen as optional by individuals, everyone atrophies. Using the admonition of Jesus to his disciples, "I am the vine, you

are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), Kevin M. Watson and Scott T. Kisker describe the essence of abiding with Christ and one another in community,

Abiding is relational. We learn to abide through relationships with God and each other. We love each other. After calling us to abide in his love, Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). It is in Jesus that we experience love and in Jesus we become His love. (584)

### **Christians Can Accomplish Far More Together Than Apart**

Wesley sought to remain in the Church of England and cautioned against Methodists leaving the church. The intention of Methodism was to revive the Anglican Church with primitive Christianity; “Separation would therefore have meant that Methodism had not succeeded in its mission, and the cost of not succeeding would be Wesley’s removal from Methodism rather than from the Established Church” (Rainey 420-34). Unity in the body impacted the effectiveness of partnering with God’s mission to the world.

In the spread of Methodist Christianity from the American colonies on the east coast westward to the Pacific coast in the early 1800s, local churches and classes sprung up under the direction of class leaders and lay preachers. Circuit riders visited regularly and administered the sacraments. As the 1900s began, Methodist Christianity became less unified and more identified with a lay-led pioneering movement and with a clergy-led settler mentality. Methodism largely abandoned classes and bands for Sunday schools, as well as circuit rider preachers for highly educated clergy. Hunter describes the consequences,

Wherever most of the ministry that matters is assigned to pastors and other religious professionals, the church is stagnant or declining; and wherever most of the ministry that matters is entrusted to the laity, the church is

growing, even in astonishingly difficult circumstances—as in China. So a rhetorical question seems necessary: Does American Methodism stand a fair chance of experiencing renaissance without recovering the ministry and mission of the laity?. (*Recovery* 14)

In the United Methodist denomination today, lines of division exist between clergy and laity. Clergy and laity struggle with being united on the definition of authentic community, the theology of the church, and the methods to achieve community that mirrors Acts 2:42-47. Clergy and laity also wrestle with the faith community's values, norms, and mores. In addition, the two groups grapple with social, economic, and leadership dynamics. These divisions have led to the body of Christ being impeded in continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. C.S. Lewis extols the virtues of the church found in the mission of God,

The Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose. (qtd. in Foster 9)

### **Each Believer is Gifted by the Holy Spirit for the Work of the Church**

The Creator endows the church with different gifts to fulfill God's mission to the world (Eph. 4:11-13). Divine gifts are given to equip his people for works of service, not primarily for the benefit of the receiver. Christ's people are equipped to build up the body of Christ until unity is reached in the faith and in knowledge of the incarnate Christ. The outcome will be that disciples will

no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph. 4:14-15).

Hirsch describes how the different leaders God appoints to the body of Christ lead in different ways as they discern the movement of God, how they have hard conversations with people, and how they make difficult decisions. Each has overriding concerns. Apostles ask, “Will this help us increase our capacity for mission?” Prophets ask, “Will this help us embody God’s concerns?” Evangelists ask, “Will this help us bring people to a point of conversion?” Shepherds ask, “How will this affect the organization and people in the community?” And Teachers ask, “How will this line up with theology and scripture?” (xxxiii-xxxiv). If Christ gave the body these different leaders with unique giftings and perspectives, then how unity will be achieved through these leaders will each be different. However, every effort is made to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

The Apostle Paul names three different lists of leadership roles in the church in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4. The originator of each leadership gift is the Spirit. From his notes on Ephesians 4:11, Wesley seems to make note of the contrasts between extraordinary and ordinary giftings.

And, among other his free gifts, he gave some apostles - His chief ministers and special witnesses, as having seen him after his resurrection, and received their commission immediately from him. And some prophets, and some evangelists - A prophet testifies of things to come; an evangelist of things past: and that chiefly by preaching the gospel before or after any of the apostles. All these were extraordinary officers.  
(*Notes on St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* Wesley Center Online)

As the United Methodist denomination discerns new beginnings and endings, a concentration on intentionally seeking after a well-rounded leadership within the body is imperative.

## **The Church is Essential to Becoming a Deeply Committed Christian**

Evidence reveals that many Christians do not connect their walk of faith with participation in the worship services of a local congregation. In October 2019, prior to quarantines resulting from emergence of Covid-19 in March 2020, the Pew Research Center reported the following:

Over the last decade, the share of Americans who say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month dropped by 7 percentage points, while the share who say they attend religious services less often (if at all) has risen by the same degree. In 2009, regular worship attenders (those who attend religious services at least once or twice a month) outnumbered those who attend services only occasionally or not at all by a 52%-to-47% margin. Today those figures are reversed; more Americans now say they attend religious services a few times a year or less (54%) than say they attend at least monthly (45%). (“In U.S., Decline”)

The activity of the body of Christ is to align with God. Disciplines, such as prayer, praise, and confession, shape the members of the body of Christ into a Temple of the Holy Spirit. Dallas Willard shares that,

A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom. When we understand that grace (charis) is gift (charisma), we then see that to grow in grace is to grow in what is given to us of God and by God. (156)

The Wesleyan movement began with the proclamation of the message of new birth and sanctification. John Wesley summarized his understanding of Methodism's purpose: "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up the Preachers called Methodists? A. To reform the nation and, in particular, the Church; to spread scriptural holiness over the land" (qtd. in Warner). This could not be accomplished without intentional organization and discipline. Societies, class meetings, and band meetings were formed as incubators of discipleship. In early Methodism, laity were

responsible for most of the ministries and most preachers were lay preachers. Richard P. Heitzenrater explains,

In order to *join* a society, persons were required to demonstrate only one condition: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.” Those who desired to *continue* in the societies, however, were expected “to evidence their desire of salvation, First, By doing no harm, . . . Secondly, By doing good, . . . Thirdly, By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” These three rules, simple in outline, were fleshed out by Wesley with specific examples (*Societies*, 70-73, 79). (138)

In the 2000s the tensions within the United Methodist denomination are more nuanced than the presenting issues dominating our discussions. For example, Hunter reports a conversation he had with Dr. Byoungsoon Kang, a pastor from South Korea, about his thoughts on Methodism in America. Dr. Kang’s comments highlight the struggle between maintaining a denomination and being a movement that has an intentional system to make disciples of Jesus Christ to impact the world,

“From what I could tell, Methodism does not really exist in America.” He continued, remarking that “your Methodist churches do not have class meetings, your people do not minister to each other through class meetings. . . In my church, and in most of our churches,” he reported, “all of our people meet in class meetings. Our members’ involvement in class meetings is even more important than their involvement in Sunday worship. Can there be real Methodism without class meetings?” (qtd. in *Contagious* 15).

## **Summary**

Theological foundations were examined to unearth frameworks for continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. The foundations of this project reveal evidence of God’s initiative, empowering, and redeeming of beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. Utilizing Hamilton’s six reasons for people

needing the church, an exploration of the multitude of nuances contained within the denominational anxiety of new beginnings and endings was conducted. As Stark clarifies,

No single institution can serve this full spectrum of religious market niches, as no one institution simultaneously can be worldly and otherworldly or lax and strict. It follows that religious monopolies can exist only to the extent that coercion is able to keep dissenting groups tiny and circumspect and that whenever coercion falters, competing religious groups will arise. (38)

### **Organizational Theory and Systems**

The literature review began with the biblical foundations of beginnings and endings of relationships, collaborations, and seasons of ministry. Theological foundations were then examined to unearth healthy frameworks for continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world through Christ's Church. Single issue voting and the contrasts between healthy and unhealthy organizations will now be explored.

#### **Single Issue Voting**

On what basis should congregation members, clergy, and leaders of the denomination make decisions on the future of their congregation or denomination? The complexities of denominational and local congregational leadership are multifaceted when discerning seasons of beginnings and endings. As Methodists in general struggle with worship styles, an aging demographic, the incarnation of Christ, the denominational stance on human sexuality, trust of denominational leadership, the nature of the church, and shrinking footprints in mission fields, when is it fruitful, or destructive, to determine relationships among brothers and sisters in the Christian faith based on a single issue?

In response to the possibility of the "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation" being passed at the 2022 General Conference because of

denominational angst around the single issue of its stance on homosexuality, William J. Abraham posits,

If the Feinberg Protocols are adopted, how can we explain how those who have voted in majority for the moral teaching of the church on marriage and related issues are now being asked to leave while those who lost the vote are allowed to continue as The United Methodist Church, complete with the lion's share of the assets?

He and many others across the theological and social spectrum of the denomination have reduced the United Methodist impasse to the single-issue of the church's definition of marriage. However, there is more going on with the denomination than a single issue. The character of the bishop, conference leader, pastor, and lay leader, or particular lobby group within the denomination, must also be considered. In addition, the voter must discern whether his or her spirit is antagonistic or loving toward those who vote differently. In a journal entry from 1774, John Wesley recorded his guidance to members of his society,

I met those of our society who had votes in the ensuing election, and advised them, 1. To vote, without fee or reward, for the person they judged most worthy: 2. To speak no evil of the person they voted against: And, 3. To take care their spirits were not sharpened against those that voted on the other side. (*Journal*)

Recently, a Catholic Bishop stated that the candidate on the ballot in national elections is more important than the single issue being considered by the voter. He rhetorically asks, "Which candidate will be likely to best advance the common good through his office in the particular political context he will face?" (Bishop). As the denomination goes through a season of beginnings and endings, the morality and appropriateness for decisions to be based on single issues must be considered. Cases for single issue voting, using politics as the context are described (Langan):

1. First, it is the exercise of a right by the individual elector, who makes a free decision on the basis that he or she freely determines. The individual voter is free both to vote and to offer any further views in explanation or justification of the vote.
2. Second, single-issue voting is an effective and important means of communicating the desires of the electors to officeholders. It is a way of indicating intensity of feeling on an issue, and it offers an opportunity of cutting through the loose and undefined connections between candidate, party platform and policy decisions.
3. Third, it represents the triumph of conscience and principle over interest and image. Instead of voting one's pocketbook, or following old lines of ethnic loyalty or patronage, or responding to the images of a soft-sell campaign and a visually attractive candidate, the voter makes a decision on the basis of where the candidate stands on a matter of principle.
4. Fourth, single-issue voting is sometimes a clear necessity. Sometimes the evil threatened or brought about by a particular group or policy is so great that it must be opposed, no matter what the possible cost to other values. As Churchill said after Hitler's invasion of Russia, "If the Führer invaded Hell, I would have to say a good word for the devil in the House of Commons."

Cases against single issue voting, using politics as the context are described (Langan):

1. First, single-issue campaigns can be set up to persuade voters to go against their overall interest. Thus a white worker can be urged to vote for antiunion candidates on the ground that they oppose school busing.
2. Second, single-issue voting destroys the spirit of compromise and the respect for conflicting points of view, which are necessary for the preservation of an open and democratic society. By encouraging some voters to attach overriding importance to the resolution of one problem -- a resolution which is usually very controversial and which often accentuates existing racial, religious and class divisions -- single-issue voting damages the fabric of democratic society and dissolves the broad political coalitions necessary for effective government in this country.
3. Third, when single-issue voting is practiced, divisive "social" issues on which people feel passionately shape the pattern of politics more than do reasonable calculations of interest. Democratic stability and civility are imperiled, and we witness not the triumph of conscience over interest but the overwhelming of reason by the passions.
4. Fourth, in certain instances, at least, single-issue voting is counterproductive and may very well be wrong. Voting for an antiabortion candidate who favors vastly

increased spending on nuclear weapons may not be a net gain for the sanctity of life. Voting for a states-righter because he will “keep blacks in their place” seems just plain wrong.

In assessing the ramifications of single-issue voting, or voting based on the perceived character of an individual or group, bias must be considered. We quickly jump to unflattering conclusions toward people who view the world differently. We argue that people act the way they do because of uncontrollable personality factors (their disposition) as opposed to doing what they do because of forces in their environment (the situation) (Patterson et al. 50). We observe this in attitudes toward political candidates and their parties, as well as toward church and denominational leaders and their interest groups. Kerry Patterson et al. continue,

We make this attribution error because when we look at others, we see their actions far more readily than we see the forces behind them. In contrast, when considering our own actions, we’re acutely aware of the forces behind our choices. Consequently, we believe that others do bad things because of personality flaws whereas we do bad things because the devil made us do them. (52)

As a new season of beginnings and endings are considered by leaders of local churches and the denomination, awareness of the entanglements of single-issue voting, and the character of the candidate or lobby group within the denomination, must be acknowledged. Presenting issues point to deeper concerns. Oversimplifying complex dynamics into one issue belittles that object and deflects attention from addressing root causes to disenchantment.

### **Healthy Organizations**

The members of the United Methodist denomination are experiencing an existential crisis. “Existential crises are confusing and high-anxiety times when a person is trying to resolve and find the answer to this question: Who am I? The existential crisis

concept is derived from Erikson (1970), who referred to it as an identity crisis” (Andrews). Organizations also experience existential crises. Considering the presenting issue of the church’s stance on homosexuality, reflective questions about the organization’s meaning, purpose, and values are being asked. As the denomination wrestles with its identity, understanding the marks of a healthy organization is needed. Patrick Lencioni breaks the process for becoming a healthy organization into four disciplines (14).



1. Build a Cohesive Leadership Team - An organization simply cannot be healthy if the people who are chartered with running it are not behaviorally cohesive in five areas: trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and results (15, 25).
2. Create Clarity - The leadership team of a healthy organization must be intellectually aligned and committed to the same answers to six simple but critical questions.
  - How do we exist?
  - How do we behave?
  - What do we do?
  - How will we succeed?
  - What is important, right now?
  - Who must do what? (15, 66-67)

3. Overcommunicate Clarity - Once a leadership team has established behavioral cohesion and created clarity around the answers to those questions, it must then communicate those answers to employees clearly, repeatedly, enthusiastically, and repeatedly (that's not a typo) (16).
4. Reinforce Clarity - Its leaders must establish a few critical, nonbureaucratic systems to reinforce clarity in every process that involves people. Every policy, every program, every activity should be designed to remind employees what is really most important. (16)

Every organization, including every church and denominational body, struggles with healthy processes. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). The presenting issue is not always the issue, or issues, that need addressing to achieve fruitfulness. Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird describe six principles of an emotionally healthy church:

1. Look beneath the surface - Deep discipleship requires that followers of Jesus “invite God to bring to their awareness and to transform those beneath-the-surface layers that hinder them from becoming more like Jesus” (71).
2. Break the power of the past - “We don't go back to our pasts for the sake of going back. We go back when we are stuck, unable to go forward” (112).
3. Live in brokenness and humility - Contemporary discipleship practices tend toward competency accumulation, leading to a form of spirituality that easily masks one's brokenness. These spiritual competencies, far from being the fruit of spiritual maturity, are merely fallen behaviors in Christian guise (116).
4. Receive the gift of limits - There are some limits God wants one to break through because they result from character flaws; and God can supernaturally move a person beyond his or her limits.
5. Embrace grieving and loss - Scazzero and Bird present a simple three-phase grieving process extracted from the life of David: (1) Pay attention—acknowledge pain, disappointment, and death rather than running from them; (2) Wait in the confusing in-between; and (3) Allow the old to birth the new.
6. Make incarnation your model for living well - One pursues emotionally healthy spirituality in order to be an “incarnational presence” (196) in other's lives. Just as Jesus entered our world, we enter another person's world and carry with us the person of Jesus.

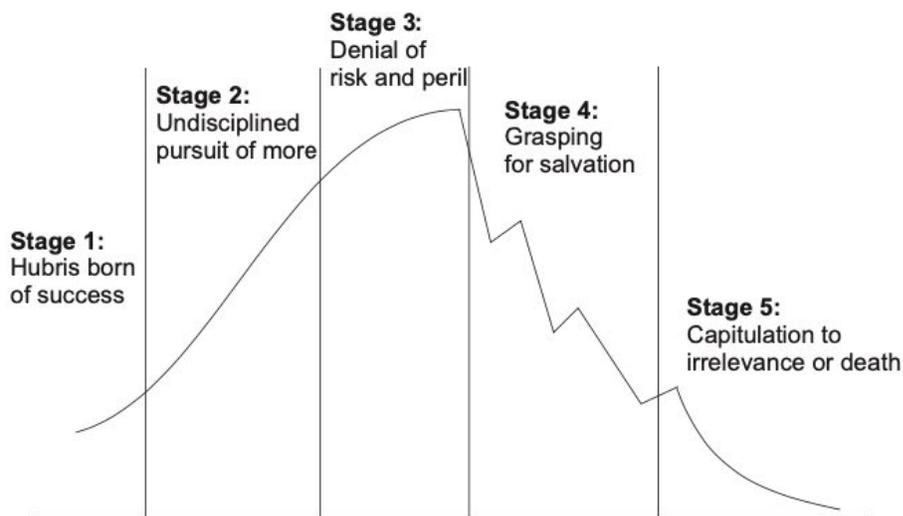
7. Slow down to lead with integrity - “when our life with God is not sufficient to sustain our work for God, we will find ourselves struggling with our integrity” (206).

Healthy organizations have healthy leadership. Leaders in every organization, including the church, need to juggle “a growing series of paradoxical demands (do more with less; cut costs but innovate; think globally, act locally)” and adapt to “the unprecedented pace of “disruptive change,” which speeds up the interaction of these demands and simultaneously increases the pressure on organizations to adapt” (Kaiser). Struggles and opportunities presented by Covid-19 reveal that leaders unable to juggle and adapt will inevitably hurt the organization.

All organizations have life cycles, and all organizations go through different phases. Healthy organizations have distinct characteristics that differ from unhealthy organizations. Healthy churches have distinct characteristics as well. A healthy body of Christ bears the fruit of the Vine they are connected to: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Over the last 15 years, the United Methodist denomination has put focused resources toward members of churches embracing the practices of a fruitful congregation: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity (Schnase). Path 1 Coaching Network from the United Methodist denomination has also spent considerable resources on training churches on how to guide people from members to disciples (Maynard). Why have these various resources not made a holistic difference in the organization?

## Unhealthy Organizations

James C. Collins details a framework of corporate decline in five consecutive stages. While written with secular organizations in mind, the findings can be adapted by church leaders to provide a pathway for congregations to discern best practices for navigating this season of beginnings and endings in the United Methodist denomination.



**Fig. 1.** The five stages of decline (Collins, 2009:20).

### Hubris born of success.

Stage 1 begins when people become arrogant, regarding success virtually as an entitlement, and they lose sight of the true underlying factors that created success in the first place (Collins 21). Pride, or hubris, is a human problem. While instructing the Corinthians on table fellowship, Paul writes, “Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1). The knowledge of the Corinthian Christians that idols had no power made them think they were better than Christians who did not understand this truth.

### **Undisciplined pursuit of more.**

Companies in Stage 2 stray from the disciplined creativity that led them to greatness in the first place, making undisciplined leaps into areas where they cannot be great or growing faster than they can achieve with excellence, or both (Collins 21).

Methodist Christianity began with societies, classes, and bands. John Wesley's "Way of Salvation" guided the faithful to be co-agents with the Spirit in bringing salvation to the sinner and revival to the nation in the first half of the 1800s. Then a shift away from our origins in societies, classes, and bands to Sunday School in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led to a distancing of the methodical nature of spiritual formation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Outcomes of this lack of denominational discipline were dire,

In 1957... surveying hundreds of persons who had been to Sunday school all their lives, LOOK found that most were still biblically illiterate...The cultural revolution of the 1960's resulted in many young adults who had been reared in Sunday school deciding not to take their children. No mainline church suffered in Sunday school loss as much as did the newly merged United Methodist Church. Churches that had built elaborate and spacious "Educational Buildings" in the 1950's saw classrooms converted to parlors. With the decline of the Sunday school, the local church lost its small group ministries. (Haynes)

### **Denial of risk and peril.**

In Stage 3, leaders discount negative data, amplify positive data, and put a positive spin on ambiguous data. Those in power start to blame external factors for setbacks rather than accepting responsibility (Collins 22). Leadership in troubling times can foster deniability of the situation. For example, admissions by the President of the United States in 2020 of his purposeful denial of the severity of Covid-19 led to a slow response by the nation to the pandemic (Wise). Leaders can address risk and peril in healthy ways by utilizing the three techniques of "show them the data," "ask leading questions," and "point out potential consequences" (Brownlee). In response to missional,

financial, and relational upheavals in 2020, in addition to postponements of General Conference and the annual meeting of the conference, Bishop Mike Lowry addressed “at least seven separated and explicit struggles” as well as hope (Central Texas):

1. The COVID-19 pandemic;
2. The high possibility of a pandemic rebound due to opening back up;
3. Ongoing issues of racial injustice and the struggle over inclusion;
4. The growing economic crisis caused by the pandemic;
5. The upcoming General Conference, vote on the Protocol and likely separation into a post-separation UMC and a new tradition-focused Methodist Church;
6. The aging of the denomination; and
7. Changing secular environment.

Lowry continues,

We are in a period of great historic shifts in the life of the Christian church and more specifically in the United Methodist branch of the church universal. And yet, this is a time of great opportunity and promise. The Wesleyan branch of Christianity called Methodism was birthed in a similar time of crisis and tumult. In the struggle of our times, we are called to be a people of hope.

### **Grasping for salvation.**

Those who grasp for salvation have fallen into Stage 4. Common “saviors” include a charismatic visionary leader, a bold but untested strategy, a radical transformation, a dramatic cultural revolution, a hoped-for blockbuster product, a “game changing” acquisition, or any number of other silver-bullet solutions. Initial results from taking dramatic action may appear positive, but they do not last (Collins 22).

### **Case Study: 2010 Call to Action Report**

In January 2010, at the direction of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church, a Call to Action steering team was formed to gather data and make recommendations leading to the reordering of the life of the Church for greater effectiveness in fulfilling the denomination's stated mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This team began with the following assumptions (*Call to Action*):

- The reassurance that the people called Methodists “are God’s accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives” (Eph. 2:10).
- A confession that as a Church we have pursued self-interests and allowed institutional inertia to bind us in ways that constrain our witness and dilute our mission. We have been preoccupied more with defending treasured assumptions and theories, protecting our respective turf and prerogatives, and maintaining the status quo for beloved institutions.
- An unflinching recognition of decades of decline in membership and attendance, less engagement and influence in communities than desired, aging constituencies and leaders, and financial strains.
- An emphasis that any “reordering” should be predicated upon sound and accurate understandings of how to best direct leadership, time, talent, and money to cultivate more vital congregations.
- A commitment to work from a foundation of facts rather than opinions by commissioning research based on extensive data-mining and objective methods for identifying relevant trends, behaviors, and issues.

After determining four key areas as indicators of vitality (number and diversity of small groups and programs, aspects of worship services, lay leadership development and effectiveness, and leadership attributes of the pastor and length of appointment), the team made the following operational assessment:

Objective examination of data, trends, and observations from UMC leaders led to identification of a creeping crisis of relevancy with an accompanying acute crisis of an underperforming economic model that are both linked to frailties in the UMC's culture. These include the absence of common definitions for the meaning of our mission statement, lack of trust, low levels of mutual respect, the frequent absence of civil dialogue, insufficient clarity about the precise roles and responsibilities of leaders, and a lack of agreed ways to measure success or assure collaboration. (*Call to Action*)

The study team then proposed five mutually interdependent initiatives they labeled "Key Recommendations":

1. In every way possible (the subjects of our prayers, the use of time, money, what we watch/report/talk about, etc.), we shall assure that our attention and the flow of resources are directed toward enriching and extending high-quality ministries in and through congregations as the primary arenas for making disciples.
2. Dramatically reform the clergy leadership development, deployment, evaluation, and accountability systems.
3. Collect, report and review, and act on statistical information that measures progress in key performance areas in uniform and consistent ways across all churches and annual conferences, to learn and adjust our approaches to leadership, policies, and the use of human and financial resources.
4. Reform the Council of Bishops, with the active bishops assuming (1) responsibility and public accountability for improving results in attendance, professions of faith, baptisms, participation in servant/mission ministries, benevolent giving, and in lowering the average age of participants in local church life; and (2) responsibility for establishing a new culture of accountability throughout the church.
5. Consolidate program and administrative agencies, align their work and resources with the priorities of the Church and the decade-long commitment to build vital congregations, and reconstitute them with much smaller competency-based boards of directors in order to overcome current lack of alignment, diffused and redundant activity, and high expense due to independent structures. (*Call to Action*)

The call for leadership was explicitly strong in the 2012 Call to Action report.

Among the recommendations, a recognition that “courageous, collaborative leaders are much more important than layers of intricate legislation or revamped organizational structures” was offered. Further, a call that, “Leaders, beginning with the bishops and including lay and clergy...must lead immediately, repeatedly, and energetically and make it plain our current culture and practice is toxic.” Additionally, “The absence of strong, adaptive, decisive leadership will hasten the rate and magnitude of the well documented indicators of decline (baptisms, professions of faith, membership, attendance, funding for connectional ministries).” Lastly, the study team made the following statement, “This is not a time for leaders who are ambivalent, reluctant, or unwilling to walk forward with humility and courage.” (*Call to Action*)

In 2012, the year the Call to Action report was issued, the United Methodist Church in the United States had over 7.6 million members (UMData). In 2019, the United Methodist Church in the United States, had just under 6.48 million members, with weekly worship attendance of 2.33 million (UMData). These numbers are based on self-reported membership and average worship attendance from local churches. In addition, in a pre-Covid memo from the United Methodist General Council on Finance and Administration (GCFA) in February 2020, a 20% reduction in churches/membership was estimated due to separation proposals being considered by General Conference, culminating in as much as a \$241 million (49%) reduction from the 2017-2020 budget (GCFA).

Unresolved challenges from the 2010 “Call to Action” report continue to besiege the denomination a decade later. There are multiple tensions within the denomination regarding clarity, movement, alignment, and focus that result in dropping membership and attendance numbers, as well as a drop of giving for missions and ministries. For

example, some within the denomination assert the United Methodist Church should be a “big tent” for all people to find a home, regardless of theology or practice (Methodism). Others would argue that striving to be a “big tent” denomination undermines our unique Methodist Christian witness (*Fallacy*). In addition, societal tensions regarding pluralism and the privatization of faith lead churches either to integrate themselves into societal norms to reach as many people as possible, or they refuse to accommodate and reach a smaller group of people (Rapport).

Included in the report was a liturgy of confession that included the following prayer:

O holy and merciful God, we confess that we have not always taken upon ourselves the yoke of obedience, nor been willing to seek and do your perfect will. We have pursued self-interests and allowed institutional inertia to bind us in ways that constrain our witness and dilute our mission. We have been preoccupied more with defending treasured assumptions and theories, protecting our turf and prerogatives, and maintaining the status quo for beloved institutions than with loving you with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. And we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

Churches can adapt methods and attitudes toward achieving healthy outcomes. But to experience divine deliverance and celebration, one must recognize the need for saving, repent, and cry out for help (Ps. 40:1-3). Repentance is key. Legal repentance is a conviction of sin, and evangelical repentance is, “a change of heart (and consequently of life) from all sin to all holiness” ( 164). Repentance is not easy in individuals, much less in churches. For the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God to happen in a church or denomination, a breaking in of the Spirit and throwing out of idols must occur. Our Methodist history reminds us of the importance of methods and repentance.

In 1738 John Wesley began meeting in a small group called a band meeting. They did one key thing each week; they confessed their sins to

one another and prayed for healing. John Wesley joined this group before his famous new birth experience at Aldersgate Street on May 24, 1738. This was a crucial beginning of Methodism. It started with confession of sin and repentance. The band meeting was at the heart of the very beginning of the 18th century Methodist revival. (A Time for Prayer)

### **Capitulation to irrelevance or death**

In Stage 5, accumulated setbacks and expensive false starts erode financial strength and individual spirit to such an extent that leaders abandon all hope of building a great future. In some cases, their leaders just sell out; in other cases, the institution atrophies into utter insignificance, and in the most extreme cases, the enterprise simply dies outright (Collins 22-23).

#### **Case Study: The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation**

In the summer of 2019, Bishop John Yambasu from the Sierra Leone Episcopal Area invited five traditionalists, five centrists, and five progressives from the United States to join him and two bishops from the global church discuss ideas on how the United Methodist Church might navigate the tensions within the denomination. After deliberations, this ad hoc committee made of different sects within the denomination united *with* one another to propose a way toward separation *from* one another. The “Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation” was originally presented to the 2020 General Conference delegates for consideration, but the Covid pandemic postponed the gathering until August 2022. The authors of the proposal state the following eight principles of the protocol to provide a pathway forward toward separation from one another:

1. Whereas, The United Methodist Church and its members—after careful reflection, discussion and prayer—have fundamental differences regarding their understanding and interpretation of Scripture, theology and practice;

2. Whereas, The United Methodist Church at its February 2019 Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis did not resolve their differences specifically related to the full participation of LGBTQ persons in the life of the Church;
3. Whereas, The United Methodist Church and its members are at an impasse, the Church's witness and mission is being impeded, and the Church itself as well as its members have been injured;
4. Whereas, The United Methodist Church and its members have a deep desire to fulfill our long-stated mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
5. Whereas, The United Methodist Church is committed to recognizing, respecting and protecting the rights and personal dignity of every person, including people of all races, sexual orientations, genders, national origins, ages, and social classes;
6. Whereas, the undersigned came together as an outgrowth of a consultation initiated by Bishop John Yambasu and other Central Conference Bishops, and were asked to represent various constituencies of the Church in reaching a gracious and dignified resolution of the impasse;
7. Whereas, the undersigned propose restructuring The United Methodist Church by separation as the best means to resolve our differences, allowing each part of the Church to remain true to its theological understanding, while recognizing the dignity, equality, integrity, and respect of every person; and
8. Whereas, the undersigned, in recognition of the regional contexts and divergent points of view within the global United Methodist Church, propose separation as a faithful step with the possibility of continued cooperation around matters of shared interest, enabling each of us to authentically live out our faith.”  
(Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation)

As of this writing, General Conference has not met to consider The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation. Therefore, results of the proposal are forthcoming. However, to consider such a proposal is in alignment with stage five of Collin's five stages of decline.

### **Research Design Literature**

To discern best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the denomination or association with which they are connected in a way that

makes the transition smoother and less painful for all involved, intentional semi-structured interviews with pastors who have experience with leading their church out of the United Methodist denomination were conducted. Semi-structured interviews with denominational leaders were also performed. All interviews were primarily done by telephone and were recorded. Each semi-structured interview used questions to solicit the participant's experiences, ideas, and concerns regarding their experience of a congregation through the process of leaving the denomination. Questionnaires of lay leaders in former United Methodist churches were also executed. Follow-up semi-structured interviews with a sample of questionnaire respondents were conducted based on responses. The goal for this research among clergy, denominational leaders, and laity is for themes and ideas to emerge in order to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the denomination or association with which they are connected in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for everyone involved.

### **Summary of Literature**

The Old and New Testaments reveal God's mission in and through God's people. God's initiating grace and power are exhibited to make all things new in a broken and sin-stained world. While God blesses the world through Abraham, God also uses Abraham's separation from Lot to accomplish the purpose of blessing all people.

As the Image of the Invisible God, Jesus' incarnation fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy recounted in Luke 4:18-19 of God's mission to the world, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon

me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus also revealed the use of Holy Spirit filled, but emotionally and spiritually dysfunctional people, to continue the mission of God as the body of Christ.

As God's Spirit gives birth to the Church, divine grace not only engulfs every corner of the globe. The fire of the Holy Spirit not only brings people to a revelation of what God does for them through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but also what God does in them through the Holy Spirit. God's mission is accomplished through this, as well as when the body of Christ intentionally multiplies to reach more people, or when separation occurs for less than holy reasons.

The theological implications of God's mission through the Church to the world is vast. Putting the mission of God into practice has had historical implications in the creation of denominations, with particular focus on those linked who trace their heritage to the teachings of John Wesley. The United Methodist denomination is a product of the mission of God being accomplished through beginnings and endings of various Wesleyan expressions of church.

The discernment of best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for everyone involved is aided by an examination of the characteristics of healthy Christian and secular organizations.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter describes the research methodology used in discerning the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. Guided by the research questions, interviews with participants in specific ministry contexts provided the data for analysis. This analysis, alongside the literature review, is the foundation for best practices for leading a congregation through this season of discernment within the denomination.

#### **Nature and Purpose of the Project**

The nature of the project is to discover a pathway for clergy, laity, and denominational officials to navigate the road of separation within the United Methodist denomination. Phone interviews with clergy and laity of local congregations, as well as denominational officials, revealed healthy and destructive outcomes of leaving the denomination. Contrasting healthy and destructive experiences from the interviews, alongside the results of the literature review, were used to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination.

#### **Research Questions**

Three questions evaluated best practices. Reviewing relevant literature led to the development of the research questions, the instruments used in research, and the evaluation of the results.

**Research Question #1: What practices or decisions make the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination fruitful for all involved?**

Research question #1 explores positive experiences and learnings from transitions that have gone well. The purpose of this question was to establish a benchmark of healthy outcomes from clergy, laity, and denominational officials who have participated in a congregation leaving the denomination or have begun the formal process for doing so. In order to collect this data, interview questions 4 and 5 addressed how discernment was aided by biblical, theological, and organizational foundations, along with descriptions of positive experiences of transitioning away from the denomination.

**Research Question #2: What practices or decisions make the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination destructive for all involved?**

Research question #2 explores the barriers experienced by churches in denominational changes. The purpose of this question was to establish a benchmark of destructive outcomes from clergy, laity, and denominational officials who have participated in a congregation leaving the denomination or have begun the formal process for doing so. In order to collect this data, interview questions 6-8 address outcomes of destructive transitions and the decisions made, and practices left undone, that would have helped make the transition more fruitful for everyone involved.

**Research Question #3: What can be learned by studying the contrasts between healthy and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination?**

Research question #3 explores the contrasts of healthy and destructive experiences of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination. The purpose

of this question was to establish a pool of responses to compare why some congregations and ministry leaders navigated leaving the denomination in a healthy manner while others did not. Interview questions 9-10 address reflective behavior and advice for others based on the experiences of the participants.

### **Ministry Contexts**

The ministry context of this project included seven pastors, three denominational officials, and six laity from United Methodist churches in the continental United States who have left the denomination or have formally initiated the process of leaving the denomination, within the last the last 5 years. Each of these churches averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance. The persons studied were selected based on the experience of the researcher and enhanced through the sharing of referrals from study participants.

The intentional selection of this specific interview set, as opposed to a general group made up of congregations from multiple denominations, was sought to determine the best practices for leading United Methodist congregations in particular through the process of leaving the denomination in a way that makes the transition as healthy as possible for all involved.

### **Participants**

#### **Criteria for Selection**

Participants were selected based on ministry context within the United Methodist denomination. Some participants were selected based on the researcher's knowledge of their experience. Other participants were recommended by clergy the researcher knew. The most

important criteria were that they had already gone through the formal process of leaving the denomination or had officially begun the process to do so.

### **Description of Participants**

Participants were engaged in the interview process based on their involvement with a congregation that had gone through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination or had formally begun the process to do so. Participants were intentionally selected to represent experiences of clergy and laity. Experiences from the local church and conference level were intentionally sought after as well. Male and female representation in the interview process was sought after to ensure a robust understanding of all persons in this project.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed of the purpose of this project to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. Each participant was given an informed consent form along with sufficient time to consider their participation in the interviews. A copy of the informed consent letter is attached in Appendix B.

In order to ensure the confidentiality of all participants, their churches, and annual conferences in which they conduct ministry are not reported in the study. A pseudonym known only to the researcher was used in referencing any participant throughout the study. No raw data, such as transcripts or original documents will be shared at any time in this study or thereafter. All raw data was maintained in protected files with the researcher being the only person with access by unique passwords and files.

The researcher shared significant findings from the study with a colloquium of Doctor of Ministry colleagues and Asbury Theological Seminary faculty on Asbury's Kentucky campus. The presentation of research findings was shared, but no raw data was ever shared, including interview transcripts or audio files.

Electronic data was stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office and backed up in a password-protected Google Drive cloud storage file. Only the researcher had access to this computer and Google Drive account. Audio files were immediately transferred to the computer and Google Drive files were deleted from the audio recorder to ensure that only the researcher had access to them. Any hard copy was kept in a locked file inside a locked office with the key in the sole possession of the researcher. All electronic data was destroyed within one year of the completion of the research project.

### **Instrumentation**

This project used semi-structured phone interviews with research participants. The researcher designed the interview questions to elicit well-rounded feedback. The semi-structured interview questions are included in Appendix A. The research was designed to determine the best practices for leading a uniquely United Methodist congregation through the process of leaving the denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved.

The researcher explored healthy and destructive transitions with participants utilizing semi-structured phone interviews. Sensing states, "Semi-structured interviews are free-flowing interviews where specific themes, issues, and questions with predetermined sequence are described in the protocol, but you are free to pursue matters

as situations dictate” (2698). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher and participant can explore ideas, themes, and questions as they arise in the conversation. However, the protocol designed by the researcher narrows the scope of conversation (2698).

Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed to contrast healthy and destructive transition experiences of exiting the denomination.

### **Expert Review**

The researcher engaged two expert reviewers on the design of the instruments employed in this project. In addition, Dr. Bryan Collier, my ministry transformation project coach, advised on the design of the instrument for this project. Through his guidance, the researcher determined that semi-structured interviews would enhance the in-depth study of the topic. The other reviewers offered notes on clarification of questions. These changes were made and resubmitted to the reviewers who were all satisfied with the final results.

### **Reliability and Validity of Project Design**

The purpose of this project was to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. To understand these best practices, participants were asked about their healthy and destructive experiences with leading the local church through the process of officially exiting the denomination. The success of this project relied on speaking with persons who have real and recent experiences of shepherding congregations through a season of new beginnings and endings. Qualitative research was necessary in order to learn from the contrasts between

healthy and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination.

The instrument developed was a semi-structured interview that asked questions about the participant's experiences. The instrument provided for the exploration of themes and topics that arose during the conversation. Transcriptions of the conversations were examined for analysis. Grounded theory design was utilized for the research of this project. Grounded theory allows “the analyst to navigate back and forth between the data and the developing story to ensure a good balance between the creative narrative and the analytics that reveal the facts and details of the story” (Bayer and Taillard).

Phone interviews were conducted to determine healthy and destructive outcomes that emerged from the experiences of participants in leading a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination. The data was then analyzed to find themes and practices that were consistent with the literature review. Healthy and destructive experiences were analyzed and contrasted to determine best practices.

### **Data Collection**

This project was designed to engage with participants using semi-structured interview questions to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. The design was qualitative in nature.

Understanding the mission context of each participant was key to understanding their experiences. Sensing states, “Qualitative research systematically seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these

settings. Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience” (1628).

This pre-intervention study began by making a list of pastors the researcher knew had officially led their congregations out of the United Methodist denomination, or had formally begun the process. The list was then reviewed and winnowed to meet the delimitations of this project: one pastor, one lay person, and one annual conference official each from six United Methodist churches in the continental United States who have left the denomination or have formally initiated the process of leaving the denomination, within the last three years and averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance.

As names and email addresses were collected, they were entered into a database (Google Sheets). Email addresses were confirmed as reliable through a test email explaining to the participants that they would soon get an email from me stating the nature of the research with an invitation to be a part of the project. Those indicating a desire to opt out of the research were removed from the list to ensure they received no further communications regarding the study.

A list of the semi-structured interview questions was developed in a Google Doc using the literature review of Chapter 2 as a basis for designing each section of questions. Attention was given to constructing a variety of question types so that different experiences were evoked. A draft of the interview questions was then sent to four expert reviewers along with a feedback form and a deadline of one week for giving feedback. This pilot test focused on smoothing out any difficult-to-answer questions and going through the process of collecting data in the Google Docs format.

Once the Institutional Review Board authorized the execution of the study, the participants were contacted via email about scheduling a phone interview through Google Forms. A confirmation email about the phone interview was immediately sent to each participant. A reminder email was sent two days prior to the scheduled phone interview.

At the scheduled time of the interview, the researcher called each participant. Gratitude for participating in the study was shared by the researcher and notation of the participant's confirmation of the interview being recorded was made. The semi-structured interview was conducted, and notes were taken. After 45 minutes, the researcher requested the opportunity to follow up with the participant as needs arose. The researcher closed the interview by asking the participant, "Is there anything else you would like to share regarding best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved?"

Audio files were transferred to a locked Google Drive folder and the original memory card was stored in a locked file in the researcher's locked office. Each interview was transcribed from the audio recording stored in digital files and saved in a password-protected file. Interview notes were stored in a locked file cabinet along with hard copies of the transcript.

### **Data Analysis**

At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher processed the interview data. Special attention was given toward learning from contrasts between healthy and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination through the filter of the literature review in Chapter 2. This enabled the findings to be as

thorough as possible. Fresh insights were then itemized into a list of best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

The problem addressed in this ministry transformation project is that, in consideration of the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace for Separation possibly being enacted at the conclusion of the next General Conference of the United Methodist Church, every congregation will have to wrestle with who they are, why they are in ministry, and whether they are equally yoked with the current iteration of the denomination. The denomination's stance on human sexuality is only one part of many that must be thoughtfully and prayerfully considered as plans are made for moving forward. A path forward with best practices must be provided to aid pastors, lay leaders, and denominational officials through this upcoming season of new beginnings and endings.

The purpose of this project was to discern the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. Interviews with clergy and laity of local congregations who have gone through the process of leaving the denomination, as well as with denominational officials who have walked with churches through disaffiliation, provided healthy and destructive outcomes of their experiences. Contrasting healthy and destructive experiences from interviews helped in the discernment process for best practices for leading a congregation through their decision-making process.

This chapter profiles the selected participants in the study and analyzes their experiences with exiting the denomination. The data consists of coded qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with participants. This chapter concludes with a summary of major findings from the collected data.

### **Participants**

Semi-structured interviews based on the research questions of the ministry transformation project were conducted with seven clergy, three denominational officials, and six laity from United Methodist churches in the continental United States.

Table 4.1 Interview Participants

Int1	Clergy	Mississippi
Int2	Laity	Texas
Int3	UMC Official	Georgia
Int4	Clergy	Texas
Int5	Laity	Georgia
Int6	Laity	Mississippi
Int7	Clergy	Georgia
Int8	Clergy	Texas
Int9	Laity	Pennsylvania
Int10	UMC Official	Mississippi
Int11	UMC Official	Texas
Int12	Laity	Michigan
Int13	Laity	Texas
Int14	Clergy	Pennsylvania
Int15	Clergy	Mississippi
Int16	Clergy	Mississippi

All clergy and laity participants left the denomination within the last five years. Denominational officials interviewed represent those who have remained in the United Methodist Church but have worked with clergy and laity who have exited the denomination. Each of the represented churches averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance. The persons studied were selected based on the experience of the researcher and enhanced through the sharing of referrals from study participants.

Denominational officials interviewed represent those who have remained in the United Methodist Church but have worked with clergy and laity who have exited the denomination. Each of the represented churches averaged more than 350 in weekly worship attendance. The persons studied were selected based on the experience of the researcher and enhanced through the sharing of referrals from study participants.

The semi-structured interview protocol provided qualitative data, which was recorded in its entirety and later transcribed. Each of the sixteen interviews provided opportunities for participants to tell their story of exiting the denomination or walking with churches through their experience of disaffiliation; therefore, many of the questions were answered in the interview in varying orders. As each transcript was read, different themes emerged from the data and were recorded. Through this process, I sought to discern best practices for leading a congregation through the process of exiting the denomination.

### **Research Question #1:**

*What practices or decisions make the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination fruitful for all involved?*

The purpose of this question was to establish a benchmark of healthy outcomes from clergy, laity, and denominational officials who have participated in a congregation

leaving the denomination. In order to collect this data, questions 4-5 addressed how discernment was aided by biblical, theological, and organizational foundations, along with descriptions of positive experiences of transitioning away from the denomination.

### **Biblical Foundations**

Denominational officials offered many theological foundations for discernment, but none shared explicit biblical foundations. However, clergy descriptions of the biblical foundations that guided them in their discernment process were varied. Six of the seven clergy interviewed made references to biblical foundations for discernment. Int1 described how he discerned his leadership of the church during the process of leaving the denomination,

Do we need our bank account for us to do the things that God calls us to do now? We've given of our tithes and gifts to that, and we would like to have it, but we came away understanding that we serve a God that has cattle on ten thousand hillsides, and he will provide (Psalm 50:10). He is Jahovah-jireh.

Int4 summarized well what most of the other clergy interviewees alluded to in their interviews about biblical foundations:

It really continued to always be about the authority of scripture. It manifested itself primarily through human sexuality within the denomination, but it's the authority of scripture. We did not want it to be a sexuality issue. We tried very hard all along to make sure our people understood that this isn't about pro-LGBTQ or anti-LGBTQ. This is about what God's Word has to say about marriage and human sexuality. And the denomination isn't being biblical in how it is managing its own house in these areas.

Of the six laity interviewed, five responded to the question about biblical foundations. Int6 stated that the tensions with the denomination were biblical in nature, “but the issue was the fact that we were not being effective, and we were limiting our

pursuit of what our church was called to do.” Discussing leadership in the church, Int13 referenced the need to adhere to “the passages of scripture that talk about elders and overseers and their qualifications.” Int2 described a conversion experience where the Bible came alive, “One minute it was just good reading. The next moment, I knew every word in that Bible was true. And if every word was true, then all things I was reading was true. That meant Jesus was true.” Int9 stated that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God and it gives the direction the church is to follow, more so than the Book of Discipline.

### **Theological Foundations**

Denominational officials shared different theological foundations for leadership discernment. An element of grace was woven through the discussions but were generally vague in what made grace definitively Christian. Int11 dove into an explicit Christocentric discussion of theological foundations for the discernment:

What I double down [on] are the issues of theological conviction and belief that to be Christian is to be in, but not of, the world. And how do you understand that? Because I think that's going to push absolutely every single one of us. And it pushes me in ways I am profoundly uncomfortable with. We're acculturated and raised as a part of the dominant culture, and we're not anymore. We have to ask, what does it mean to live as a strange and odd minority that others look at and think, “You're kind of quaint, you're out of it.” And so, I really double down on that long term. And this is going to take a while for this to shake out. But both on the liberal and on the conservative side, holding on to a cultural conception of Christianity will not work. I don't care where you are. You know, it will not work.

Clergy responses were varied. Several stated that upholding the authority of Scripture was a theological foundation they built their discernment process on. Int1 shared,

It's not about sexuality because at \_\_\_\_\_, one of the things that we want people to know is that we're all sinners saved by God's grace, and that where else would Jesus want people then under the umbrella of his grace? If we say you're not welcome here, we are doing a disservice to that

grace of God. So, we all come in. Currently, we still have same sex couples that worship here. They're part of \_\_\_\_\_, even though they know we transitioned out. And that was one of the issues, not THE issue, because we knew that we could not be silent. We wanted to put our energy into kingdom matters and not on matters that could not be reconciled.

The churches led by Int1 and Int7 were on opposite sides of how their theology guided their discernment process. They, and their churches, left the denomination for different reasons. Int7 stated, “We knew we were going to be an inclusive church where we would emphasize that gay folks can come here. We feel it’s what John Wesley would want. We feel it’s what Jesus would want.” All the clergy took their responsibilities of pastoral leadership seriously. Int1 stated a theological foundation of leadership that guided him,

You know, what I settled in my heart is that one day I'm going to have to answer to a higher power than a bishop or district superintendent of how I oversaw the church that he blessed me to lead and be part of. And I can't imagine standing before him and him saying to me, why did you just let go along with that?

Theological foundations that guided laity in their discernment process were specific in nature. Four of the six laity interviews explicitly referenced a theology of the Bible that guided decision making in their churches. Int2 stated, “Our core conviction is the authority of Scripture. The Bible is the Word of God. It is the authority for all we believe and do.” Int5 shared, “I’m pretty much looking at Jesus’ ministry to the disenfranchised among us and who the modern-day tax collectors and prostitutes are.” As someone who recently came into the United Methodist Church after being a part of different denominations and non-denominational churches, Int13 shared how specific theological questions guided his discernment of joining a United Methodist church in his new city of residence.

From being coming out [sic] of the big city, the United Methodist Church is very, very liberal. Some of them that I knew of were actually almost pushing a kind of a United Church of Christ mentality of questioning, is Jesus, really the son of God? Was there really a virgin birth? That sort of thing. Which I'm like, well, those are kind of important to me. So that was really honestly, one reason why I think we waited so long to actually come visit the church. It was the reputation of the denomination.

### **Length of Time in Leadership**

As of January 2021, interviewed pastors averaged 22.7 years in pastoral leadership of the churches they have led through the process of exiting the denomination. In addition, the unique roles of being the founding pastor of the congregation, or growing up in the community in which the church resides, impacts trust and leadership in times of crisis and opportunity:

**Table 4.2 Clergy Length of Leadership**

Int1	21 years	
Int4	18 years	
Int 7	28 years	Grew up in community
Int8	25 years	Founding Pastor
Int14	28 years	
Int15	16 years	Grew up in community
Int16	23 years	Founding Pastor

The length of time lay leadership has been in the church they served also matters greatly in developing trust among church members and in the community as the church is led through seasons of crisis and opportunity. As of January 2021, five of the interviewed laity averaged 17.4 years as members of the churches they represented in the interviews. One interviewed laity, Int12, left the denomination 3 years ago and is not included in the average. In addition to the length of time in a church, the unique role of being a founding member of the congregation impacts trust and leadership in times of crisis and opportunity.

**Table 4.3 Laity Length of Leadership**

Int2	25 years	Founding member
Int5	17 years	
Int6	21 years	
Int9	21 years	
Int13	3 years	

### **Support of the Denomination Before Disaffiliating**

Three of the clergy interviewed had served as annual conference delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conferences prior to exiting the denomination. In addition, one clergy led his church members to guide the prayer ministry of the annual conference. Another clergy served on different annual conference and district boards. Int4 shared that even though the church he serves has now disaffiliated from the denomination, he and the lay leadership sought to engage and support the denomination in multiple ways before separating from the denomination.

We really sought to engage and support the denomination. We paid our apportionment in full every year. I served on the district board of trustees. Our church has been very involved. We really tried for years from within to be a force for positive change inside the denomination. We weren't a company church, but we were really hoping and praying for revival and repentance within the denomination. And trying to be a force for positive change. Then it reached the point we realized that was not going to happen any time soon. And that's when we began the formal process of asking for permission to disaffiliate.

Laity support of the denomination before disaffiliating was varied. One had served on the prayer team for the annual conference. One had served as their church's delegate to annual conference. Two had no participation with the denomination outside their local church's interaction with their District Superintendent and Bishop during the disaffiliation process.

## Prayer

Half of the churches were led into specific seasons of prayer before, during, and after the discernment process of leaving the denomination. One clergy shared the importance of the practice of prayer through the discernment process.

\_\_\_\_\_ is a church that has consistently sought to connect to God through prayer. So, this entire process has been so deeply in prayer along the way, including calls to prayer. I think we did a 40 day, and we did another 21 day, call to prayer to our entire congregation as we were coming toward milestones. So, we asked everybody to be on their knees on this with us as we as we sought to make sure we were really doing what we thought we were being called to do. (Int4)

Int16 described how their elder board is made up of influencers and leaders selected for a lifetime of service who meet with the pastor weekly to pray for the needs of the church and lead the church to be faithful to Christ. Another clergy shared details about how specific times of prayer, wedded with submission to the authority of the denominational leadership they were under, created space for the Holy Spirit to move in the congregation,

In the midst of those 40 days of fasting, we hold prayer meetings, we disseminate tons of information, we have two town hall meetings where there's just lots of margin for the congregation to get informed, for the congregation to ask questions, for the congregation to speak in favor of or against, and lots of prayer during the 40 days of prayer and fasting. Then we come together for an official church conference called by our district superintendent and run by our district superintendent. So repeated theme here - we're trying to use the authority structures that are in place. We're trying to submit to the processes that are allowed. (Int8)

One denominational official explicitly referenced the practice of prayer in the discernment process. When asked what they would share with someone who came to them about discerning how to lead their church, they responded:

The first thing is, have you prayed about it? You know, and I'd probably get deeper in the weeds about talking to me about your discernment process. And in the discernment process, you get into things like what's your vision, how do you hear God calling you? (Int11)

Three laity omitted any references to the personal or corporate practice of prayer in decision making. One laity described their church as a house of prayer and referenced their pastor's practice of teaching on prayer and incorporating prayer in every aspect of discipleship (Int2). In describing their dependence on prayer through the disaffiliation process, Int9 stated, "This whole thing was surrounded by prayer by our congregation before we started any meeting. We would go around the table and every member of our leadership committee prays." Int13 shared the importance of listening in prayer, then acting.

We need to make sure that we are trying to follow where Jesus Christ is leading us as a church and as individuals. So, listening and trying to discern is not an instantaneous thing. You take one step in front of you. And when God lets you know the one step, you take the one step and that's it until He reveals the next step to you.

## **Leadership**

Int16 noted the importance of the specific roles the elder board and administrative council played in the discernment process of disaffiliation. Int7 described the importance of the right lay leader at the right time:

One of the major things was getting the right church council chairperson. The old one was rotating off, so we knew it was going to be very important. So, it wasn't just asking who a good church council chairperson for the church would be, but who would be a good church council person for walking us through this process. I'm more of an artistic kind of person, and she has that more structured mind. \_\_\_\_\_ was steeped in Methodism, a cradle Methodist. She understood the social justice issue. In fact, one of her children came out and is gay. But she already understood the issue before he came out. She's not afraid of asking tough questions and hearing tough answers. Not afraid of disagreeing with me. Or any

other leaders of the church. She's very calm, even under pressure, very organized and smart and then committed.

Denominational officials noted the importance of clergy and lay leadership in the local church for discernment of disaffiliation, while also noting that the annual conference had to lead well in guiding churches through the process. One noted that the annual conference leadership could lead better by taking more of a proactive approach in encouraging district superintendents to engage with their local churches to begin discussing the tensions of the denomination instead of waiting for them to initiate the conversations (Int10). Int3 reiterated the same thing in how their annual conference developed a leadership plan to come alongside churches exploring disaffiliation.

We have a plan for walking through the process with churches. We are training people called Navigators who would go into churches that are discussing leaving the denomination. They would facilitate conversations among the laity so the church can decide without the pastor having to be the lightning rod in the middle of the conversation. If you're proactive and you plan ahead for multiple contingencies, then, it's less knee jerk and less emotional for everyone.

### **Membership classes**

The role of membership classes led by the pastor were vital to the long-term development of culture and values within the church body. Pastoral leadership of classes is imperative. Int7 shared the tension he had to address in these classes about the United Methodist trust clause, where all local church property is held in trust for the denomination:

Over the years when I have new member classes, I have to explain to members, you know, thank you for your tithes and your offerings. But I've got to tell you, we don't own this property, the denomination does. It's going to be nice not to have to make that speech anymore.

Int 8 described the importance of his leading the new membership class in his church for the past 24 years, since the church was founded. On the church's website, the

class is described as an opportunity to get to know the heart of the lead pastor and ask questions, “If you feel that God has called you to make \_\_\_\_\_ your home church where you can grow in Christ and develop meaningful and healthy relationships, then this class is for you.” The website then invites every registrant for the class to access video and PDF links to detailed explanations from the senior pastor about what the church believes, three levels of belief, convictions, persuasions and opinions, and controversial issues. In his interview, Int7 shared,

No one joins the church without attending this class. The two most important things we share in that class are absolute commitment to the full trust of God’s Word. And where our church stands on controversial issues like abortion, homosexuality, and scripture. This lays the groundwork for unity. It’s a good reason to start a membership class if you are not already leading one.

### **Research Question #2: Description of Evidence**

*What practices or decisions made the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination destructive for all involved?*

Research question #2 explores the barriers experienced by churches in denominational changes. The purpose of this question was to establish a benchmark of destructive outcomes from clergy, laity, and denominational officials who have participated in a congregation leaving the denomination or have begun the formal process for doing so. In order to collect this data, questions 6-8 address outcomes of destructive transitions and the decisions made, and practices left undone, that would have helped make the transition more fruitful for everyone involved.

### **Broken Trust**

Every clergy and laity interviewed lamented the broken trust they experienced with the denomination. For most, their frustration was centered on the lack of leadership

and accountability among the Council of Bishops and rulings of the Judicial Council on matters that went against Scripture and Book of Discipline polity. The election of Bishop Olivito in 2016, a self-avowed practicing homosexual, in the Western Jurisdiction was ruled by the Judicial Council to be in direct violation of the Book of Discipline. However, the council determined it was not their responsibility to remove her from episcopal leadership. The lack of accountability and the Bishop's continued leadership as a denominational episcopal leader has eroded trust in the denomination.

For others, their frustration was with the lack of leadership and accountability among the Council of Bishops in leading General Conference delegates in overturning the language in the Book of Discipline regarding human sexuality. Int7 stated that if the General Conference had voted in 2019 to be inclusive, he and his church would have stayed in the denomination. Int5 shared frustration with the lack of leadership of the denomination considering the Supreme Court legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015, "How sad, how sad is it that the couples who've been together for decades and been attending church together could not be married in their sanctuary by their pastor?" Again, the lack of accountability and leadership by the Council of Bishops and General Conference eroded trust in the denomination.

Int4 and Int8 clarified how their frustration was not in the denominational leadership of their annual conference. They had worked well with the Bishop and cabinet for years and understood the limits of influence within the Council of Bishops. Int14 had a similar respect for his Bishop and cabinet but his frustration with denomination leadership was expressed in a meeting with his episcopal leader and district superintendent as they discussed disaffiliating from the denomination,

When I went to the bishop and I sat it in there, I went in with trepidation and a little bit of fear on my part. And when I left, I left with great sadness for our conference and for our denomination. I said to Bishop and members of the cabinet, all of whom I had good relationships with, “I don't want to hurt your feelings. But for the last 50 years, since 1968, the United Methodist Church has been in decline. If you bishops were football coaches, you would not have a job because your team has lost every year. And here's what frustrates me. I don't know if you don't know how to fix it, or if you're just unwilling to fix it.

### **Destructive Outcomes**

There was almost unanimous agreement among the clergy and laity that destructive outcomes of disaffiliation in the local church were very minimal in nature. All respondents mentioned growth in attendance, participation, and giving in their churches since disaffiliation. Int12, a lawyer, shared a perspective from families and denomination conflict, “The last thing a struggling family wants is a struggle in the church. When there is a struggle in the church, they leave and never come back. They are relieved to leave and happy to join churches who are not affiliated with denominations and the struggles that come with them.” He goes on to share that every church he has worked with through disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church has grown.

In addition, many reported a “spiritual lid” being lifted off their congregations. Int9, a lay person, responded, “Negatives? I don't think I can give you one. Even older people who voted against leaving the denomination stayed with the church after disaffiliation.” If specific destructive outcomes were detailed, they centered around relationships. For example, Int8, a clergy, shared,

We lost four families out of ten thousand people on our member and non-member rolls. I sincerely grieve those four families, but I'm not sure there's anything I could have done differently with them. We hurt some of our LGBTQ friends who just didn't understand what we were doing or why, and then we hurt some of our United Methodist brothers and sisters

outside of our walls. So, if I had unlimited time, I would have met with those people one on one to share my heart with them. All they can see in my heart is what they're hearing through the grapevine, or if I got to give a three-and-a-half-minute speech at annual conference.

However, the experience of Int4 was indicative of most of the responses shared with the interviewer about destructive outcomes,

I hope this doesn't sound weird, but none. We haven't seen any kind of significant departure. We haven't seen people withholding their time or talents or gifts. We have seen the ability to focus on what matters. Instead of this internal battle that was just a distraction for way too long. The average member of \_\_\_\_\_ sees no difference in what they are experiencing. Staff notes a few things and most of them with a lot of joy, including not having to do the annual report.”

### **Research Question #3: Description of Evidence**

*What can be learned by studying the contrasts between healthy and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination?*

Research question #3 explores the contrasts of healthy and destructive experiences of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination. The purpose of this question was to establish a pool of responses to compare why some congregations and ministry leaders navigated leaving the denomination in a healthy manner while others did not. Questions 9-10 address reflective behavior and advice for others based on the experiences of the participants.

### **Exiting into Another Denomination or Independence**

Of the six churches represented in the interviews, five disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church and into non-denominational, or independent, status. The remaining church affiliated with the Free Methodist Church. The process for discernment of what relationships to enter post-United Methodist Church was varied among the churches represented.

Most of the pastors had supported the work of the Wesley Covenant Association to form a new denomination and had entered independence while awaiting General Conference action on the Separation Protocol. However, most of these pastors had determined that the longer they were independent, the harder it was going to be to go back into a denomination. Int14 shared that his church considered themselves, “nondenominational, independent, congregational, and evangelical.” In order to have an umbrella of accountability over them, they have aligned with the Malachi Network, a loose association of about 50 ministries around the world that aligns with the mission, vision, and values of their church while providing full autonomy. This relationship with the Malachi Network also allows his church to develop their own network of churches in their region of the United States. Int7 and Int5 are from a church that disaffiliated from the denomination in 2020 because of the United Methodist Church’s failure to achieve full inclusion for LGBTQ persons. They chose to exist as a nondenominational, independent, and congregational church. The week interviews were conducted, the church was meeting to approve bylaws as an independent church.

The church who entered a relationship with the Free Methodist Church was very detailed in their methods of discernment as to where God was leading them after their relationship with the United Methodist Church ended. In alignment with Paragraph 2548 of the Book of Discipline, which states that a congregation can disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church to affiliate with an evangelical denomination, the church formed a denomination research team to determine what denomination might be a fit for the church in the event they disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church. An evaluation form was created to discern each denomination. The church’s seven core

beliefs were listed to assure alignment with a new denominational home was achieved. In addition, questions regarding support in the belief in the supernatural, ordination of women, biblical stances on marriage and sexuality, and control of assets were asked. The original list of thirteen potential denominations were narrowed down to three by the team, then the Free Methodist Church was recommended to church leadership.

### **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate**

Every clergy, laity, and denominational official emphasized the need for frequent and clear communications and the need to actively listen to those impacted by the disaffiliation process. Int12 shared the tension within the denomination between the denominational strife, ignorance of the strife within congregations, and clergy and denominational officials being hesitant to discuss the strife.

There's a whole bunch of churches out there that have no idea what's happening in the denomination. And the ones that do know are not doing anything. They are just doing what they've been doing since 1970, which is kicking the can down the road about decisions on theology, clergy placement, following the Book of Discipline, homosexuality – everyone just kind of hopes it goes away. It's not going to go away.”

Int2, laity, shared how the DNA of their church was not based on identification with the denomination, but communication about denominational ties could have been better with small group leaders during the disaffiliation process since they had to answer questions from fellow laity. However, this laity affirmed that the overall communication plan within the church was very good. Int4, the pastor to Int2, described how prayer, trust, and determination to dialogue guided their church's communication plan,

Pray your guts out and get your people involved in it. Do not surprise your Bishop. Surprises are great at birthdays, other than that, probably they are rarely very good. Do not surprise your people. We were in regular dialogue to the point they're sick of hearing about it, but just so nobody

can look up and go, Wait, what? That you've given everybody plenty of opportunity to know what you're thinking, what you're asking them to pray about, and what's coming? After that, it's either you do or you don't, if you've already got the brownie points built up with your people and the trust that it's going to be easier. Or, you don't. It's going to be harder. But don't just assume that everybody in your congregation knows what you and your leadership know. We were really intentional for years leading up to this. There was a whole lot of dialogue and it was painful at times because people can only absorb so much. And if you're talking about a denominational split, then you're probably losing audience on something else you'd rather be talking about. But we were just so determined to dialogue a ton with our people and give them lots of opportunity to talk back and let us know what they were thinking or what they were concerned about.”

Int1 described transition update meetings held with his church. In a town hall meeting with the church in January 2017, the pastor described the tensions in the denomination, including seminary education and influence, declining attendance, human sexuality, poor leadership, and lack of adherence to biblical authority. Along with church leadership that was present, the pastor shared that God had called the church to, “quietly withdraw from this denomination.” The pastor then laid out a schedule of meetings and invitations to pray. A meeting from May 3, 2017 included a description of the most recent Judicial Council rulings, the status of the negotiation process with the annual conference, and an opportunity for the lay leader and pastor to provide a situation report on the current and future state of the church. The meeting concluded with a question-and-answer session between laity and church leadership.

One congregation represented in the interviews by two clergy and one laity shared the communication plan of their church. Once church leadership was ready to make a recommendation for exiting the United Methodist Church and entering the Free Methodist Church, the church body was fully informed of the process and invited to be a part of it in multiple ways. The central point of communication was entitled, “Our

Church's Future." In addition to a letter from the lead pastor describing his thoughts on the denomination tension and recommendation moving forward, recommendations from the church leadership team, FAQ's, invitation to town hall meetings for laity to ask questions and church leadership to listen, key dates, descriptions of how the Free Methodist Church aligned with the church's core values, calls to prayer and fasting, and a description of the voting procedures were included. The goal of church leadership every step of the way was to be faithful, relational, discerning, and obedient.

### **Integrity**

Owning who you are and being consistent in your words and actions is to be a person, and church, of integrity. Int3, a denomination official, described the Bishop and cabinet's desire to be as graciously clear and proactive as possible in their relationships with clergy and laity in their annual conference discerning the process for exiting the denomination. The development of the annual conference disaffiliation policy in light of the 2019 General Conference was to provide an equitable and fair process for all churches. The policy passed by the annual conference in 2019 was transparent in defining disaffiliation time limits for churches, the process for decision making, terms and conditions were clearly defined, the formula for financial obligations of churches disaffiliating was clarified, and a provision for the re-establishment of a disaffiliated church with the denomination was explained. Integrity of relationships among all levels of the annual conference was a prime motivator for the policy.

Int5 shared her experience of moving from the Northeast to the South and seeking a church that had a reconciling heart for LGBTQ. In her discussions with Int7 as she explored the church, he shared that they had to be calm and trust the process. Int7 shared

that his heart, and that of the church he leads, has been focused on social justice since 1993.

Especially in the South, we needed to play by the rules. I wasn't going to marry a gay person that would affect our future just with the hopes that one day it would eventually change for the denomination. It had already changed for the Episcopalians and Lutherans. I saw it coming for the Presbyterians and I thought it would for the Methodists. About five years ago, the congregation voted not to have any weddings at \_\_\_\_\_ until all the members could be married there. So, we haven't had a wedding there in a long time. And in fact, my daughter just got married in February and she couldn't get married in the church she was raised in, but she understood, and she was all for it. But it was just a shame because we knew we were about to take this step.”

Int 5 and Int7 both shared experiences at a meeting with annual conference delegates after the St. Louis General Conference in 2020. Int7 described how one of the delegates announced to the attendees, “We understand there are differences of opinions on everything, but for those who want change, you just need to know your train is never going to arrive.” Int7 commented that while he and his church were disappointed, “at least the delegate was honest with us.”

While on the opposite side of the LGBTQ issue than Int5 and Int7, Int16 shared what it meant to be a person, and church, of integrity.

We have always been about the mission of Jesus first. In fact, we have two mantras. One is “if we will do what is right for the Kingdom of Christ, it will always be what is right for our church.” But we don't want to get caught trying to figure out what's right for our church and hoping that it's right for the Kingdom of Christ. In fact, when the elders finally made that decision to disaffiliate, my only question back to them was this, “Are you convinced that this decision is what is right for the Kingdom of Christ? I'm not worried about what the church is doing – it is about, is this what is right for the kingdom of Christ?” And that was the question we asked at every stage. And we always kept getting a unanimous Yes.

### Ask the Right Questions

When asked what they would share with someone who asked them about how to discern best practices for disaffiliating from the denomination, most brought up asking a version of the question, “Why are you wanting to leave?” Int1 stated that knowing you want to do something is different from following through and actually doing it: “There's a difference between a want to and a will to. You've got to have a will to do this because it is so hard.” One denominational official (Int10) stated his first question to a pastor wanting to lead his or her church out of the denomination would be, “Is this your church's decision or yours?” He went on to clarify,

If you leave the denomination but your church decides not to, what are you going to do? Are you just going to go off by yourself, or back up if you don't have the church go with you? Do you have the backing of the congregation? If you're going to make this decision, make it from your heart and be willing to understand the church might not want to go with it.”

Each clergy spoke of the high percentages of church members who voted in favor of disaffiliation. No one reported less than a 95% affirmation of leaving the denomination. Int15 specifically discussed unity regarding a church vote:

Are you sure your congregation is united? I would not lead the church out of the denomination if you had even a 75 percent vote to do it. We had ninety-eight percent approval, but unless your congregation is united and committed to it, you'd be foolish to go ahead with it because you will only cause division and bitter feelings.

Regarding denominational loyalty and the question of whether or not the United Methodist name matters to the people the church is supposed to reach, Int4, who was a lay person in the church before becoming a pastor in the church, stated,

Coming from different faith backgrounds, I don't think people join denominations anymore. Like, I grew up Southern Baptist. I found myself to be staunchly Southern Baptist until I wasn't anymore. We joined the church, not the denomination. So, it was not a stretch for us as a couple when it came time to leave because our heart was with God and \_\_\_\_\_, not the denomination called Methodism. And I think that's probably true for a huge percentage of our people. We again, those staunch, cradle Methodists struggled with this, but that was a very small percentage.”

### **Summary of Major Findings**

The data resulting from this project yielded significant findings regarding best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved. The findings may have relevance for any Christian church discerning next steps in their ministry and mission. Several major findings emerged based on the data analysis. They are listed here only in summary form and are further discussed in the next chapter:

1. Healthy churches have low tolerance.
2. Denominationalism is not a motivator for vibrant local mission.
3. Leaders influence with integrity.
4. Biblical leaders address difficulties.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT**

#### **Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter identifies five major findings from the research project. Utilizing data collected from semi-structured interviews, along with a review of biblical, theological, and organizational theory literature, best practices for leading a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination emerged. The chapter concludes with limitations of my study, unexpected observations, and recommendations for further study.

#### **Major Findings**

##### **Healthy Churches Have Low Tolerance**

Prior to my research, I observed that individuals will not stay with an organization that does not share their values or reach their level of leadership effectiveness. If there is no alignment of values, or leadership is perceived as weak, the person will be unhappy or go elsewhere. Likewise, healthy people want to be a part of healthy organizations, whether they are related to their child's sports teams, their neighborhood homeowner's association, or church.

My semi-structured interviews with pastors and laity who have disaffiliated with the United Methodist Church confirmed this observation. I observed healthy local church leadership determining they were misaligned with unhealthy denominational leadership in multiple ways. Therefore, a determination was made to go elsewhere. One example regarded a meeting conference leadership held about charges brought against a pastor who performed a same-sex marriage in violation of the denomination's Book of

Discipline. The pastor of one church (Int14) stated, “Walking into the meeting, they were handing out flyers about the guidelines for discussion. Number six stated, “You may not quote scripture or read from the Bible.” I was done.” He reported back to his church leadership and within six months they had disaffiliated from the United Methodist Church.

In my literature review, Lencioni’s Four Disciplines of Healthy Organizations supports this finding. That organizational health is found in building a cohesive leadership team, creating clarity, overcommunicating clarity, and reinforcing clarity, supports this finding. In many ways, these four disciplines are missing in the denomination, but found in the churches that have disaffiliated. Likewise, Scazzero and Bird’s Six Principles of An Emotionally Healthy Church reveal that healthy organizations have healthy leaders. Collins’ description of the Five Stages of Decline also reveals that when healthy leaders of churches determine that the ecclesiastical body they are a part of is in stage four, Grasping for Salvation, or stage five, Capitulation to Irrelevance of Death, they will lead their flock to separate from the unhealthy influences for the sake of their own health.

The biblical and theological foundations of this project also pointed to examples of separation from unhealthy persons or groups for the health of the individual or group. Healthy organisms have low tolerance for unhealthy organisms. Jesus’s teachings of abiding in the Vine (John 15) also includes examples of pruning away dead or diseased branches. The examples of Abraham and Lot, as well as Paul and Barnabas, also confirm the finding that healthy churches or individuals have a low tolerance for unhealthy denominations or leaders.

Similarly, the heritage of Methodism is one of seasons of pruning and new growth. Examples include: The Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in 1784. The African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in 1787 after disaffiliation from the Methodist Episcopal Church over racial discrimination. The Methodist Protestant Church was formed in 1830 after disaffiliation from the Methodist Episcopal Church over the roles of clergy, laity, and bishops. In 1844 the Methodist Episcopal Church branched into North and South incarnations over the issue of slavery. The Free Methodist Church was formed in 1860 over doctrinal and holiness issues. North and South expressions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, along with the Methodist Protestant Church reformed as the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1939. In 1968, the United Methodist Church was formed when the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church formed. The various expressions of Methodism in the United States reveal that when the denomination is deemed to be unhealthy, sects will leave and form what they deem to be healthy denominations or new ministries. Healthy churches have low tolerance for a denomination they deem unhealthy.

### **Denominationalism is Not a Motivator for Vibrant Local Mission**

I have observed a growing distrust of denominations in society in general, and in the local church specifically. My interviews with clergy, laity, and denominational officials across the United States confirm my observations and lead to this finding. The ministries and missions in the communities where the church is located find their genesis in the mission, vision, and values of the specific church in that particular mission field, not in the denomination.

In my semi-structured interviews, pastors and laity repeatedly spoke of their church's relationship with people in their community. The relational connections in the mission field sprang forth from a love of God and their neighbors. Pastors and lay leadership sought to find ways to invest in their communities in multiple ways so that the grace of Jesus Christ was shared. While the general ethos of the United Methodist denominational view of faith *and* works was implanted in the DNA of these churches, church leadership did not find their primary motivator for missions in their local community from their annual conference, or General Conference actions.

For example, there is no prohibition in the United Methodist Book of Discipline from being in relationship with persons who identify as LGBTQ; nor having them be members of a church or participating in areas of service. Denominational guidance in the polity of the United Methodist Church is helpful in offering guidance for missions but is not determinate of specific acts of mission in a community. Therefore, the only hurdle to being in vibrant ministry with LGBTQ persons in a community is the willingness of the pastor and local church leadership in that community to engage with them. Vibrant mission to the community, in this regard, is not dependent on further institutional action. Institutionalism is not a motivator for vibrant mission in local communities; mission, vision, and values of the local church leadership are the prime motivators.

In the case of The Free Methodist Church, the denomination promotes a five-fold understanding of "The Free Methodist Way" of being the Church of Jesus Christ and continuing his ministry to the world: Life-Giving Holiness, Love-Driven Justice, Christ-Compelled Multiplication, Cross-Cultural Collaboration, and God-Given Revelation. However, each local church must determine the method and the extent they will live into

the five-fold understanding of “The Free Methodist Way” in their local mission field. “The Free Methodist Way” is a guide and goal, but not determinate of the mission of a particular church in its specific mission field. The Free Methodist Church as a denomination cannot exercise vibrant local missions apart from the local Free Methodist church in a specific community. The role of a particular church in a community either provides credence to the goals of the Free Methodist denomination or undermines them.

While the resources and directions of the annual conferences of the United Methodist Church for mission are helpful, especially for churches with limited resources of people, time, and money, they are not meant to drive vibrant ministry in local communities. Pastors and lay leaders err when they rely on denominational officials to lead missions in the mission field of the local church. Denominational officials err when they assume local churches need them to do missions, instead of finding ways to come alongside the churches to impact lives in the community in the name of Jesus Christ.

The biblical and theological foundations of this project also pointed to vibrancy of missions apart from institutionalism. Paul and Barnabas’ interaction with the Gentile community informed and shaped the Jerusalem church (Acts 15). This example of divine synergy made each ministry better; one was not above the others. Likewise, the theological understanding of the Church as the continuing incarnation of the Word impacts a church’s vibrant mission in a particular place and at a particular time, apart from, but also as an extension of, the wider Church. God comes into the world God created to redeem creation from sin, shame, and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God blesses God’s people with salvation to be an instrument of God’s salvation

to others. The history of the United Methodist denomination is linked with the incarnation of Christ and

[i]ncludes God's self-revelation and action in history through the call of Abraham, the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, and especially the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God's Word Jesus Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. (Book of Discipline 11)

When a church is confused about who it is, to Whom it belongs, and what it believes, the church loses the divine impact and influence it was meant to have in the community in which it lives. When a denomination is likewise confused, the confusion is compounded. However, when a local church is clear about who it is, to Whom it belongs, and what it believes, the divine impact of the church in the community is clear.

Denominational confusion has less negative impact on that church and community.

### **Leaders Influence with Integrity**

My experience is that people will follow a person who is authentic, more than a person who is always right. A relational leader who genuinely loves the people he or she is called to shepherd, is transparent in their sinful struggles to a point where people can identify with them but not to the point where people feel uncomfortable, and is willing to admit when they make mistakes, generally exerts more influence than others in positional roles of leadership. Understanding oneself being consistent in your words and action is to be a person, and church, of integrity.

I observed this multiple times in my semi-structured interviews for this project. For example, laity affirmed the integrity of their pastor multiple times. While acknowledging their pastors are far from perfect, laity affirmed that they trusted their pastor to lead with integrity. For most, this trust had been built over decades of relational leadership in their church. The influence of the pastor and lay leadership was first based

on the integrity of relationships, and secondly on shared values such as social justice or inerrancy of Scripture. Positional influence only went as far as the relationship allowed it to go.

In my interviews, I also observed a disadvantage denominational leaders experience with having laity trust them based on the distance in relationships between the pews and episcopal office. For example, multiple laities shared how their experience of the denomination was negatively influenced by bishops or district superintendents coming to a church meeting to discuss disaffiliation and either speaking down to the congregation or belittling their pastor. Multiple laity and pastors referenced how a denominational leader quoted demographic data for an area without confirming the data with the people who lived in that community. For many, these experiences solidified their concerns about the denomination.

This is not a recent phenomenon. In the first 50 years of Methodism in America, distrust of the British influence over methods and structures caused great tension. As the first two bishops of American Methodism, Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke had to navigate the positional leadership they were ordained into by John Wesley with their relational leadership of the people under their care in the American colonies. Today, as denominational officials attempt to influence the local church in matters regarding disaffiliation, the distance between the pews and the episcopal office must be acknowledged. Relationship proximity matters in leadership integrity.

The literature review also affirmed this finding. Lencioni's emphasis on healthy organizations overcommunicating clarity and reinforcing clarity are relational in nature. Communicating answers to questions clearly, repeatedly, and enthusiastically involves

interacting with people. People are normally able to ascertain whether the person communicating organizational values is authentic or not. If they are perceived to be inauthentic or disingenuous, they will no longer be trusted, regardless of the positional title.

Biblical and theological research also affirmed this finding of integrity and influence. The Apostle Paul influenced with integrity. On a macro level, his epistles have enormous influence on Christian theology, ethics, and practice. Yet, Paul's influence with integrity on a micro level with churches and individuals is the foundation upon which his macro level influence is built. His influence with integrity began with making his encounter with the Risen Christ his main form of credentialing (Gal. 1:11-16). While he had much to boast about, he laid his authority and influence at the feet of Jesus (Phil. 3:1-11). Paul would also do anything he could to make sure people knew Jesus by acknowledging and addressing their felt or real needs, even at the risk of being seen as foolish in the eyes of many (1 Cor. 1:18-31, Acts 17:16-34). Paul was transparent with his struggle between sin and grace (Rom. 7:7-25) and suffering (2 Cor. 12:1-10). These trials were not to be hidden but used as instruments of instruction in discipleship. He held people in loving accountability (1 Cor. 5) and ensured that God's character revealed in love always guided the lives of disciples (1 Cor. 13). He also influenced with integrity by showing that God's mission led by the Holy Spirit was paramount, even at the expense of personal relationships (Acts 21:1-16).

As people are saved into a loving relationship with God through Jesus, they are filled with the Spirit. Evidence of relationships of integrity are based on abiding in the Vine (John 15). Divine love is the fruit evidenced in a life of integrity. As Paul describes

to the Christians in Corinth, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Further, if you have been ordained, or have a role in the denomination, or served in the church for years, but do not have love, you are nothing. Clergy and lay leaders of integrity are more influential in the Church than official stances of the denomination and episcopal leadership.

### **Biblical Leaders Address Difficulties**

During the research interviews, I experienced clergy, lay leaders, and denominational official who genuinely wanted to lead well. Multiple pastors and laity shared awakening experiences of divine discernment during seasons of prayer and fasting. Through intentional planning of events for simply listening, as well as a willingness to have hard conversations based on transparency of the denominational tensions, these leaders influenced the people God placed in their care. Lastly, sharing experiences of difficult decisions being made for disaffiliation from the denomination confirmed that biblical leadership is difficult, but fruitful. In these interviews I found that biblical leadership includes discerning the movement of God, listening to others, having hard conversations, and making difficult decisions.

The literature review confirmed this finding as well. Emotionally healthy churches reveals that biblical leaders live in brokenness and humility and make incarnation the model for living well, “Just as Jesus entered our world, we enter another person's world and carry with us the person of Jesus.” (Scazzero and Bird). Biblical leadership is more robust than simply discerning the movement of God, or listening to others, or having hard conversation, or making difficult decisions; biblical leadership

encompasses all four aspects, plus others. John Wesley's central discipleship question—"How goes it with your soul?"—reveals that biblical leadership is exhibited in humility before God and others that leads to discerning, listening to others, having hard conversations, and making difficult decisions.

Biblical and theological foundations also confirm this finding. Abraham's discernment to defer to Lot concerning the land God provided him involved listening to Lot, having a hard conversation, and making the difficult decision to obey God's leading. Additionally, Jesus' promise of new life (John 10:10) brings death to the pursuit of unilateral leadership through human means where acts of the flesh are shown (Gal.5:19-21). Instead, a life centered on faith and obedience to Jesus empowers one to lead others through God's inbreaking of heaven (Acts 2) where the fruit of the Spirit is displayed (Gal. 5:22-23).

As recorded in Acts 6, when the number of disciples grew exponentially, communication and caring among the followers of The Way became more complex (v.1). The Twelve Apostles, who had been in the upper room and experienced the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus empowering them to continue God's mission in the name of Jesus, discerned the movement of God, listened to the needs of the people, and had hard conversations with the people. They gathered everyone together and modeled incarnational leadership. In doing so, they led through a difficult situation (v.2-4). The proposal by the Apostles to trust how God's Spirit would move through the group pleased the people (v.5). The Spirit led the Apostles, who could have kept their distance from the people and chosen not to listen to God or the people because of their status as The Twelve, to be in humble partnership in meeting needs directly. As a result, the Word of

God spread, the number of disciples increased rapidly, and many lives were changed (v.7). Biblical leaders discern the movement of God, listen to others, have hard conversations, and make difficult decisions. Seasons of beginnings and ending of relationships, collaborations, and partnerships result from decisions and commitments to follow Jesus.

### **Ministry Implications of the Findings**

#### **Intentional Clergy and Laity Conversations**

First, pastors and church laity must immediately begin having conversations with one another about who they are, why they are in ministry, and whether they are equally yoked with the denomination. Waiting for the denomination to make official decisions is too late. Also, ignoring the denominational tension will not make it go away. Using a three-fold plan to discern, inform, and listen would provide guidance for the pastor and laity to move forward through these uncertain times.

The process of discernment needs to begin with the pastor and lay leadership. A call to the church for prayer and fasting that is not modeled by the church leadership is not faithful leadership. An explicit decision by leadership to allow space for God to move is more important than setting hard and fast timelines for discernment to be completed by. While there are schedules to set and keep that are outside of the control of the pastor and laity, an intentional decision on the part of church leadership to not rush through the process is imperative. Confirmation from the Holy Spirit is not directed by the calendar.

Information sharing through sermons, church communications, and classes are imperative as well. Leaning into our Wesleyan heritage and theology can provide a good framework for the information that the church body needs. Repeated opportunities to

learn from the pastor and lay leadership about the current state of the denomination, Wesleyan theological heritage, Wesleyan history of seasons of beginnings and endings, the Book of Discipline, the impact of formal separation plans on the local church and the community, and the mission, vision, and values of the local church is mutually beneficial for everyone. Having a systematic approach to communication ensures that the discussion of specific denominational tensions is placed in a proper framework. Additionally, the manner in which this information is shared sets the tone for how the congregation perceives the tensions in the denomination and local churches. How information is shared can either reinforce the denominational struggle as a crisis to manage or an opportunity to live into. The question arises whether information will be shared in a spirit of divisiveness and anger, or in a spirit of humility and grace. This tone flows from intentional discernment through the means of prayer and fasting taking place at the same time.

Acknowledging the importance of listening to the Holy Spirit and the congregation is vitally important to the health of the church and directs the scheduling of events to simply listen. Inclusion of corporate prayer services, instilling silence and space for listening prayer in small groups, and training on the spiritual disciplines of personal prayer and fasting are building blocks for a culture of listening for, and to, God. Likewise, scheduling events for the congregation and staff to ask questions provides an opportunity for leadership to be attentive to the needs of the people. Intentional listening sessions with different groups within the church body provide opportunities for the church leadership to discern how God's Spirit might be moving in the congregation to confirm or challenge convictions of leaders made in private. Once again, using a three-

fold plan to discern, inform, and listen provides guidance for the pastor and lay leadership to immediately move forward in communicating with the congregation.

### **Leadership Vacuums and Healthy Leadership**

Second, when there is a leadership vacuum, someone, or something, will try to fill it. The failure of the Council of Bishops and Judicial Council to lead according to the polity set forth by official General Conference decisions over the last five decades has created a leadership vacuum. The multiple presenting challenges the denomination is struggling with today are not new; the pastors and laity of the denomination have simply buckled under the weight of unhealthy leadership. The self-inflicted leadership void created in every level of leadership in the denomination has fomented sects across the theological spectrum providing leadership for pastors and laity who want, and need, to be led. The implications of a fractured denomination because of broken trust have resulted in the Separation Protocol. While my research has revealed that there are healthy leaders at every level of the denomination, I have not interviewed anyone in the denomination who would define the United Methodist Church as a healthy organization.

Local church leadership need to learn from the denomination about what *not* to do as an unhealthy organization. Pastors and lay leadership *then* need to embrace what it means to be persons of Christian integrity and humbly lead the church they serve to live into the attributes of a healthy church as outlined in Chapter 2. As with the human body, the process from moving from unhealthy practices to healthy practices takes time. Each body is different. Life experiences and environments must be considered. Support systems need to be built and negative influences need to be distanced from. However, the journey to health is vitally important. Will pastors and lay leaders not only address the

immediate struggles of the denomination as evidenced in the Separation Protocol, but also take steps to build healthy unity for the long run? In the absence of healthy leadership, loud voices are heard, and allegiances to different sects are made. Whether a pastor, church, or annual conference remains in a post-separation United Methodist Church, aligns with another denomination, or becomes independent, the opportunity for healthy leadership is greatly desired.

### **Articulate a Christocentric Theology of the Church**

Finally, unless a theology of the Church is articulated and lived into, neither the post-separation denomination, nor a new denominational home, will succeed. The pastor and lay leadership must take the lead in humbly pondering the theology of the Church and then be willing to change the mission, vision, values, and organizational structures of the church to bring them into alignment with that theology. Likewise, denominational officials would lead well in ensuring they are not only able to articulate a theology of the Church, but model what it looks like to change how they lead and make decisions based on that theology.

Hamilton's questions referenced in Chapter 2 provide opportunities for the curious to go beyond contemporary experiences of their local church and into the depths of biblical and theological foundations for their congregation and denomination. Why do people need the Church? Ideally, any leader in any level of the denomination would articulate the expansiveness of God's design for the people who are called by the name of Christ to be a light unto the world in continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. In addition, any leader in any level of the denomination would articulate how Christ is the Head of

the Church and every pastor, laity, and denominational official is under the sovereignty of the Lord. Lastly, an articulation by any leader in any level of the denomination that the purposes of the Church are found in following the Christ revealed in Scripture would ensure the denomination does not go its own way. Wrestling with this question is key for discernment of next steps in any level of the denomination.

In addition, the leader's theology behind answering the question—"Why do people need this particular church?"—must be addressed. In addition, this same question needs to be asked of the denomination, "Why do people, or churches, need this particular denomination?" To guard against confusing the spirit of the age (Eph.2:1-3) with the Spirit of Christ, each level of leadership in the denomination would do well to ponder the theological implications of the church as the continuing incarnation of the Word, the church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit, how each believer is gifted by the Holy Spirit for the work of the church, and how the church is essential for becoming a deeply committed Christian.

Without wrestling through the theology of the Church, the danger is that all levels of the denomination will make pragmatic decisions to accommodate their current situation. Some will make the pragmatic decision to stay in the denomination if the Separation Protocol is enacted because it is easier to stay with what they know than to change. Their decision may have nothing to do with a biblical theology of the Church, or the mission of God. Likewise, others will make the pragmatic decision to leave the denomination because of the desire to leave what they perceive as dysfunction and heresy. However, their decision may not have anything to do with a biblical theology of the Church, or the mission of God. Their decision may have more to do with politics,

finances, social justice, or freedom. The implications are immense at all levels of the denomination in how leaders wrestle with discerning their theology of the Church. Unless a theology of the Church is articulated and lived into, neither the post-separation denomination, nor a new denominational home, will succeed in the ways God determines success.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the results of the project were not significantly impacted, my interactions with denominational officials were limited. I had hoped to have six different denominational voices represented in the project but had three instead. Perhaps the limitations were due to the timeframe of the interviews during the season of Advent. Also, many of the denominational officials who had worked with the churches represented in the interviews no longer served in their annual conference positions. Most of the interviews with participants utilized Zoom. However, one-quarter of the interviews utilized phone interviews because of the poor connectivity of Zoom technology.

One difference I might consider if I were to conduct this study again would be to simplify my questions. I discovered that most interviews had an ebb and flow and the answers to my questions normally came about without me formally asking the prescribed questions. In addition, I would limit the length of the interview to 45 minutes. An additional 15 minutes of interview time did not necessarily add value of the project. If I were to simplify questions, a shorter interview time would robust data.

### **Unexpected Observations**

One unexpected observation from the project was the love shared between pastors and laity in their churches. Trust built up over time led to mutual respect and a willingness to take risks. The pastors I interviewed loved their church family, and the laity I interviewed loved their pastors. These were not transactional relationships, but interdependent relationships that not only impacted the church family, but the community in which these churches were in mission and ministry.

An additional unexpected observation from the project was the desire of denominational officials to find a way forward with integrity when the denomination they represent is in Collins' stage five of decline, "capitulation to irrelevance or death." While pastors and laity did share stories of denominational officials being obstinate and retributive in their interactions with churches as they exited the denomination, stories were also shared of denominational officials who strived to lead well with humility in an organization trying to survive. My interviews with denominational officials revealed a desire to lead well when the road ahead for the denomination is filled with blind curves.

Unexpectedly, I learned more of the vast and robust nature of spiritual disciplines relating to leadership. This project confirmed the importance of leaders practicing the inward spiritual disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting, and study. Evidence of spiritual fruit from these disciplines were widespread; the absence of spiritual disciplines was evident as well in some cases. Churches cannot go where their leaders are not willing to journey to themselves.

However, the examples of corporate spiritual disciplines of confession, worship, guidance, and celebration were profound and meaningful to me. I have confidence that

the churches who intentionally practice the disciplines of the Spirit will be vibrantly continuing the ministry of Jesus to their local community and into the world long after the experience of disaffiliation fades from memory. The relational act of submitting to and obeying God overrides the transactional act of leaving a denomination. I fear that churches led by pastors and leaders who are better versed in methods of organization leadership and influence, at the expense of a shared walk of submission to Christ, will soon have the luster of freedom from the denomination fade. As Jesus explained the Way of the Cross, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mark 8:34-36). This unexpected finding has led me to be more intentional in focusing on personal and corporate discipleship as we address the methods of possible separation from the denomination.

### **Recommendations**

While this study produced significant results, there are always ways to improve and expand on this study. I have summarized three.

In a future study on the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved, it would be helpful to interview teams of laity from each church, as opposed to one member from each church. The data collected in a group of no more than five laity from each church would unearth deeper understandings of culture, values, leadership, and discipleship of the laity. This could help increase the validity and reliability of the data.

I would also recommend a future study to focus on the experiences of three churches and their discernment of why and how they should leave the denomination, as opposed to six. While multiple churches were represented in this study, going deeper with a smaller number would have provided case studies for future researchers to learn from. This project was not able to gather this type of information due to limitations of the study.

Considering any formal proposed separation plans within the United Methodist Church, I would recommend a study of one large church, one medium church, and one small church as they navigate life as a church before the separation occurs, and after it is implemented. The nature of the project would require long-term planning and a willingness to develop research instruments to capture data before, during, and post-separation. However, the study would potentially be a wellspring of biblical, theological, organizational, and relational narratives that would be a valuable resource for students of the church in the future.

### **Postscript**

When I started my doctoral studies, I was a church planter. Prior to the third year of the program, I became the pastor of a 150-year-old church. My focus on the dissertation waned and the focus of the project changed many times. Yet, the denominational angst remained. After years of walking through the dissertation wilderness having pastored two distinctly different churches in a denomination coming apart at the seams, I was able to see what had been in front of me the whole time: “How do you discern best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving

the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved?” God’s timing was perfect.

This project has affected how I think about and articulate a theology of the Church as I discern the movement of God and listen to, and lead, the people of God. The tensions of the denomination, and local church, are not always encapsulated in a presenting issue. There is always so much more nuance to a presenting issue based on history, theology, personality, spiritual giftedness, timing, and hidden organizational tensions experienced by the individual, church, or denomination. Behaving as if the presenting issue is really the main issue is like trying to reduce a fever in a child without exploring the imbalance in your child that caused the fever to present in the first place. A continual effort to reduce the fever, without getting to the root cause of the fever, is bad parenting.

The exploration of the biblical and theological foundations of the project, along with the literature review and interviews, has also impacted how I come alongside and equip the laity to be in partnership with one another. The laity must have responsible ownership of the decisions made as the Body of Christ in that local community. Pastors have multiple roles to fill: apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher, counselor, leader, administrator, and friend, among many others. However, the pastor is not to take the place of Christ as Head of the church. While Moses did go up the mountain alone to converse with God to then come down and lead God’s people (Exod. 19 and 20), the Twelve together modeled discerning the movement of God, listening to others, having hard conversations, and making difficult decisions (Acts 6).

As the Head of the Body, Christ has equipped the church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers to “equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13). This project has reinforced my belief in the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:5). Therefore, my role is to build a cohesive team, create clarity, overcommunicate clarity, and reinforce clarity that the ministry the church has entered into is the “ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world.” As one of the pastors shared in his interview with me, he expected God to work in and through the laity,

We have always been about the mission of Jesus first. In fact, we have two mantras. One is "if we will do what is right for the Kingdom of Christ, it will always be what is right for our church." But we don't want to get caught trying to figure out what's right for our church and hoping that it's right for the Kingdom of Christ. In fact, when the elders finally made that decision to disaffiliate, my only question back to them was this, “Are you convinced that this decision is what is right for the Kingdom of Christ? I'm not worried about what the church is doing – it is about, is this what is right for the kingdom of Christ?” And that was the question we asked at every stage. And we always kept getting a unanimous Yes.”

During this project, I have had the great opportunity to meet many faithful people across the United States. I have tried to represent them fairly and faithfully. I have also tried to be faithful to biblical and theological foundations for seasons of beginnings and endings. Through it all, I have tried to be discerning of ways we can all be more faithful in continuing the ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son, to the Father, through the Holy Spirit, for the sake of the church and the world. I have grown immeasurably through this project. I trust that the Lord might use it one day to help others grow as well.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions for a Semi-Structured Interview

This document provides the outline for the semi-structured phone interviews that will be conducted for the purpose of discerning the best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved.

*\*Permission for recording interviews has been granted through proper documentation. The transcript and audio recording of the interview are kept in a password protected file.*

#### **Introductory Questions**

1. What is your name and the name of the church or conference you serve?
2. What role do you serve in the local church or denomination?
  - a. What are your responsibilities in your organization?
  - b. How long have you served in this leadership position?
3. Will you share the story of your church leaving the denomination, or the story of you overseeing a church in your conference leaving the denomination?

#### **Research Question #1**

What practices or decisions make the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination fruitful for all involved?

4. How did you discern it was time to lead your congregation out of the denomination?
  - a. What Biblical foundations guided you?
  - b. What Theological foundations guided you?
  - c. What practices guided you?
5. What are the healthy outcomes you have experienced as a result of a church leaving the denomination?

#### **Research Question #2**

What practices or decisions made the transition of a congregation out of the United Methodist denomination destructive for all involved?

6. What destructive outcomes have you experienced as a result of a church leaving the denomination?

7. What practices do you think led to a poor transition?
8. What practices do you think would have helped the transition?

**Research Question #3**

What can be learned by studying the contrasts between healthy and destructive transitions of congregations leaving the United Methodist denomination?

9. What would you do differently now, based on your experience of fruitful or destructive outcomes of transitioning?
10. What would you say to someone discerning exiting the denomination?

**Final Questions**

11. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding best practices for leading a congregation through the process of leaving the United Methodist denomination in a way that makes the transition as fruitful as possible for all involved?
12. May I contact you in the future should additional questions arise pertaining to our conversation?

**APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT LETTER**

Season of Change: Navigating New Beginnings and Endings Within the United  
Methodist Church

**DESCRIPTION**

You are invited to be in a research study being conducted by Wade Killough from Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because you have experienced the process of a church leaving the United Methodist denomination, or have formally begun the process.

**TIME INVOLVEMENT**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a single one-on-one phone interview with Wade Killough. The interview should take no more than one hour.

**PAYMENTS**

You will receive no payment for participating in this study.

**PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your interview will be recorded for transcription and data collection purposes. You can refuse to respond to any or all questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time.

**QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS**

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this research, its procedures, risks and benefits, contact Ellen L. Marmon, Ph.D., Director, Doctor of Ministry Program (Beeson International Center, Asbury Theological Seminary), 859.858.2054.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Yes  No

I give consent for the transcripts of audio files resulting from this study to be used for dissertation research, development of training materials and development of published materials about best practices for leading a congregation through the process for leaving the United Methodist denomination:

Yes  No

PRINT NAME \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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