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BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES OF SENIOR PASTORS
IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

by

David S. Thornhill

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education in Ethical Leadership

Olivet Nazarene University

Bourbonnais, Illinois

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IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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David S. Thornhill



APPROVED BY:

Emmanuel Reinbold, Ed.D., Dissertation Chair

Kelly S. Brown, Ed.D., Dissertation Reader

Kelly S. Brown, Ed.D., Program Director

Steve Lowe, Ph.D., Vice President for Academic Affairs

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DEDICATION

To Erica. Life is so much sweeter with you by my side.

ABSTRACT

The current study explored the leadership style and practices of 12 senior pastors in the Church of the Nazarene in the United States whose churches had experienced numerical growth under their leadership. The researcher theorized that uncovering the common leadership style and common leadership practices of these pastors would lead to suggesting growth strategies that may be taught to clergy and applied to churches in the USA region of the Church of the Nazarene. This qualitative collective case study revealed collaboration as the common leadership style among pastors of growing churches. This study also identified 11 common leadership practices among pastors of growing churches, among them are visionary leadership, culture development, lead and lag indicators, and relationships. Lastly, this research found adaptive leadership as the leadership strategy necessary to address the fractured nature of the church community in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Church attendance has been trending downward for decades (Burge, 2020; Fowler et al., 2019; Franck & Iannaccone, 2014; Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz, 2020), and the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic that hit the world in 2020 has greatly accelerated that trend (Adamy, 2021; Barna Group, 2020a), leaving the church in desperate need for effective pastoral leadership to return to growth. Due to the current declining state of worship attendance, the topic covered in this qualitative study are the common leadership experiences of 12 senior pastors who have led their churches to numerical growth in the United States region of The Church of the Nazarene denomination. The effort given to this project provides a needed addition to the body of literature on effective pastoral leadership.

By way of introduction, it is important to understand the reasons for the decline that many local congregations are experiencing. Church decline can be defined as the numerical shrinking of congregations due to a decrease in participation by those who once considered church to be an important part of their lives (Ferrerira & Chipenyu, 2021a). Although there are many metrics that can be measured in a church, the common barometer for the general health of a local church is its ability to increase worship attendance (Powell et al., 2019; Rossi & Scappini, 2014).

In addition to church decline, pastoral leadership that leads to growth was also explored in this study as church growth and decline are closely tied to the leadership of a

local church (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b). Church leadership goes well beyond simply leading a Sunday morning worship service, and includes practices such as: vision, recruiting, financial management, preaching, teaching, and counseling. The aim of this research was to cover the entire scope of the leadership provided by a senior pastor that leads a church to healthy growth. The result of a healthy church is growth (Demesi et al., 2022).

Leadership has a considerable role in society, and the church is no exception. Scripture explicitly addresses the need for leadership in Proverbs 11:24 delineating that “Without wise leadership, a nation falls” (New Living Translation). Effective leadership, though not the only factor, is a primary means for the church to experience vitality. Church vitality is expressed as both church spiritual health and numerical growth in worshippers (Jo et al., 2021). Leading an organization to grow is not easy, it is complex and requires specific leadership characteristics (Northouse, 2019). Consequently, when there is poor leadership, a church will struggle (Fowler et al., 2019). The coronavirus pandemic and the resulting decline for in-person worship attendance is expected to create new challenges to church growth (Burge, 2020). In a climate that is increasingly complex and fraught with change it is increasingly imperative that pastoral leadership practices be developed and wisdom be gleaned to assist and equip church leaders to manage these complex challenges.

While many churches in the United States are declining in membership and worship attendance, there are some churches that are experiencing extensive growth (Davis-Olds, 2017; Fowler et al., 2019; McMullin, 2013). Earls (2022) found that while 65% of churches are declining or plateaued, 35% are in fact growing. The research done

by Thumma (2021) found that one third of churches are growing, namely those over 250 attendees. Earls (2022) has found that in the post-COVID era 17%, or one in six pastors, say their congregation has grown larger than they were prior to the pandemic. These churches should be studied to determine if there are any common leadership practices in place that are enabling them to gain traction. It is wise to point out that most statistics are prior to the COVID pandemic. Data for post-COVID church attendance has been hard to find as the post-COVID church is in its infancy in which clergy are struggling to know how to numerically understand virtual worship.

Chapter I outlines the nature and purpose of the study, beginning with a statement of the problem, that states the need for understanding effective pastoral leadership practices. The background of the study investigates the need to understand the experiences of pastors who led their churches to grow, thus framing the purpose of the study. In the section entitled situation to self, the researcher outlined his motive and the research paradigm for this study. Also addressed are the research questions and methodology for the study. Included in this introductory chapter are definitions of key terms used in this study, assumptions, and limitations. Chapter I concludes with a summary and overview of the remainder of the study.

Background

The problem of decline in church attendance in the United States is well known and grieved by both pastors and churchgoers (Davis-Olds, 2017). Jones (2021) found that church membership fell below 50% of the national population for the first time since they began tracking the trend in 1937, when US church membership included 73% of the national population. Budijanto (2020) reported that between 2016-2018, 39% of churches

in America were not growing. Ferreira and Chipenyu, (2021a) note that there was a 13% decline in Protestant church membership between 2005 and 2021. Stetzer and Dodson (2007) reported that 70-to-80% of North American churches are plateaued or declining, while an additional 3,500 to 4,000 churches close each year. As numbers continue to decline across the nation, one wonders if this loss in members can be thwarted or if it is now the status quo for the United States (McMullin, 2013). The reasons for the decline in worship attendance are complex and will be reviewed thoroughly in the literature review presented in Chapter II. A predominant cause for church decline appears to be a general lack of valuing church growth among pastoral leaders (Davis-Olds, 2017; Irawati, 2021). The leadership practices of pastors who have led their churches to grow in membership may explain the pastoral leadership practices needed to reverse the trend of church decline.

Situation to Self

The following sections explain motivation for conducting this current study, my philosophical assumptions, and the research paradigm that will serve to guide this study.

Motivation

My motivation for this research is twofold. First, as a lifelong member in the Church of the Nazarene, and a minister in the denomination for the past 29 years, I have a personal concern for the decline our church is experiencing in the United States. I have led four churches in my 29-year career and all four of them have grown. My tenure in the pastorate provides insight into the issues, problems, and solutions facing the church. Second, having been educated in a Nazarene college and a Nazarene seminary, I know first-hand the imbalance between theological training and leadership training. Our

schools are heavily weighted on theological training and are leaving pastors poorly trained to lead a church to fulfill the great commission of Jesus Christ. My hope is that this research will provide practical pastoral leadership principles that can be taught to others.

Research Paradigm

The current study was guided by the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. This constructivist-interpretivist paradigm requires that the social phenomenon being studied is understood from the participants *lived experience* rather than the researcher's hypothesis (Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm advocates for a hermeneutical approach to finding answers, meaning that meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection (Ponterotto). Therefore, this research relied heavily on qualitative data collection such as open-ended interviews, observations, field notes, and documents (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Both Abdul and Alharthi (2016) and Ponterotto assert that the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is an alternative/response to the over-dominance of the positivist paradigm. Whereas the positivist approach relies on deductive interpretation of data, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm relies on inductive interpretation of data, that enables the researcher to develop assumptions through the development of broad themes from the data rather than starting with a hypothesis (Ponterotto). This would be the reason for interviews to be transcribed and coded in search of themes. Abdul and Alharthi provide clarity on the goal of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm as being not to discover universal knowledge and truth but to understand the interpretations of individuals about the social phenomena they interact with.

Problem Statement

The problem, succinctly stated, is a lack of clarity concerning the specific pastoral leadership practices required to address local church decline in The Church of the Nazarene denomination within the United States.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to explore the pastoral leadership practices that lead to church growth, specifically in The Church of the Nazarene denomination within the United States, in order to address the current state of church decline. The mission of the church remains the same as it has always been, but the leadership to execute that mission needs improvement and development to meet the demands of a post-COVID world (Chen & Sriphon, 2021). The new era has ushered society into uncharted territory in which the type of leadership that will lead to success is simply unknown (Bolsinger & Penno 2017). Constant learning is vital to an understanding of the type of leadership needed in this new era (Bolsinger & Penno). The current study will explore the leadership principles and practices that are effective for leading a church to grow in days to come.

The impact of effective leadership behaviors and practices on an organization cannot be understated as leadership is critical for the success of an organization (Arikan, 2020). The most important factor to run and grow an organization in a manner that leads to success is effective leadership (Mishra, 2016; Valldeneu et. al., 2021; Wollschleger, 2018). Without effective leadership, organizational growth is difficult to obtain (Arikan; Pinkrah, 2020).

Effective leadership leads to successful results and organizational growth for both secular organizations (Palmer-Atkins, 2018) and the church (Ham, 2012). Leadership

practices have a direct impact on an organization's competitive advantage in the marketplace by providing direction and motivation, and also by leading members toward common goals. (Kouzes & Posner, 2019). Effective leadership, whether it be in the church or any secular organization, plays an irreplaceable role in creating positive behaviors and successful performance of followers (Shunlong & Weiming, 2012). In fact, the growth of a church is dependent on the behavior of its pastor to provide effective, excellent, and appropriate leadership (Ham, Keita & Lao, 2020; Royster, 2016).

Ineffective leadership in a local church is a likely contributor to diminished attendance and membership (Fowler et al., 2019). Leading church growth expert, McIntosh (2021), maintained that pastoral leadership principles are the best sources for church growth. However, current research that explores effective pastoral leadership qualities and their impact on the vibrancy, health and growth of a church is a challenge to discover (Rogers, 2021). Both Ham (2012) and Davis et al. (2010) showed that much research has been done on pastoral leadership styles, but there is a gap concerning pastoral leadership principles that lead to church growth. While somewhat dated, Butler and Herman (1999) gave further support as they wrote "the study of ministerial leadership effectiveness has been hampered by much greater emphasis on describing ministerial leadership styles rather than identifying specific behaviors and skills" (p. 230). Several recent studies such as Keita and Lao (2020), Wollschleger (2018), and Fowler et al. (2019) maintained the claim that very little research has been done and little attention has been given to the impact of pastoral leadership practices on congregational growth. This research aims to add to the literature on pastoral leadership practices that directly lead to growing the worship attendance of a local church.

The Importance of Gathering

Church attendance is the most powerful predictor of religion in a person's life (Van Ingen & Moor, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic had a massive effect on churches, causing them to switch ministries to online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom (Arthur, 2021; Pakpahan, et al., 2022; Reimer, 2021; Zandroto, 2021). While that was necessary for the pandemic, tensions arose because Christianity is a communal religion that encourages in-person fellowship and in-person worship gatherings (Campbell, 2020; Cho, 2021; Garba, 2021; Irawati, 2021). In Hebrews 10:24-25 (New International Translation) it is written, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." The author of Hebrews feared that Christians may opt out of worshipping, which will result in their turning away from following Jesus.

Jenkins (2021) expressed the sentiment of many clergy that when members skip worship, or even worship virtually, they are implicitly encouraged to violate this passage from Hebrews and miss out on communal participation. Forsaking the gathering is a sign of waning faith that typically precedes a person leaving the church altogether (Jenkins). Shifting to virtual worship may cause many to lose an intimate connection with God (Zandroto, 2021) thus marking a spiritual decline which Ferreira and Chipenya (2021a) share that always precedes the numerical decline of a church. While pastors are still wrestling with the virtue and vices of virtual worship Birch (2021) shared that some secular companies such as Google, Apple, and Amazon confirm they will return to in-person work because there is something about being in the room together that makes

things happen. The same may be said of worship, causing clergy to grapple with whether they will embrace virtual worship or not.

Luke 4:16 (New International Version) says “Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.” This verse reminds us that Jesus’ weekly pattern was to be in worship. Those who call themselves followers of Jesus should follow in that pattern. Many aspects of community are lost when a person ceases to gather with the church (Jenkins, 2021) including appropriate physical touch, corporate communion, lending their voice to singing, and the laying on of hands in prayer (Simanjuntak et al, 2021).

Protestant churches especially value in-person worship as they provide a strong sense of belonging (Lee & Oh, 2021). The COVID pandemic has forced many to worship virtually, yet many have begun to view online worship services as a lesser form of worship and refer to them as *mock-services* (Simanjuntak et al, 2021). The church has always been one that gathers for worship and considers the gathering of worshippers central to its mission (Wong, 2022), yet virtual worship will likely have a place in the church post-pandemic in three instances: emergencies, sickness, and travel (Simanjuntak; Lefebvre, 2022).

The Gathered Community Becomes the Scattered Community

The importance of worship is not merely found in what we do in worship, but what worship does in us (Campbell, 2021). The nature of the church is to be both a gathered and a scattered community (Campbell; Snook, 2019). Campbell referred to gathering as the *solid* church and the scattered as the *liquid* church. The church can be described as a community of believers who gather to worship God and then scatter to be

his ambassadors (Baron & Pali, 2021; Campbell; Ward, 2021). When the church gathers, it is collectively disciplined to be like Jesus and mobilized (i.e. scattered) to live out its faith in the wider community (Snook). Spiritual formation is a communal experience, not a private experience (Snook), which accounts for one reason the church places an emphasis on participation in the community of believers (Mpofu, 2020). When the church gathers, it receives its identity to have a greater love for God and neighbor, which leads to the mission of the scattered church (Snook). Christians have always seen worship as central in that it forms one to be a Christian (Campbell), thus, the proper focus of attending formal worship is not merely for attendance but for transformation (Campbell; Wong, 2022). Attending worship not only forms us but it commissions us to be the body of Christ in the world (Campbell; Wong). After we are transformed, we are sent out. The church gathers to be transformed and scatters to live out God's mission (Wong).

Therefore, worship is not an outdated model. The greatest concern for pastors about people not returning to church after the pandemic is not that they did not return as much as our worship/preaching prior to the pandemic was not formative enough to prepare them to stand firm (Campbell). Simply put, if the church does not gather to be formed, they will not be scattered to serve. In-person gatherings must not be abandoned because the worship service empowers members to reach out in love to the world (Baron & Pali).

Benefits of Worship

The decline in church membership is driving church closures (Keita & Lao, 2020), and by the rate of decline, one would conclude there might be negative benefits to worship; however, research illustrates many beneficial effects from church involvement (Charles et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021). Highly religious people report better outcomes

among a wide range of observable factors, including increased health and happiness (Pew Research, 2010). Highly religious people are less likely to commit a crime, experience lower blood pressure (Graham, et al., 1978), practiced less drug use, are more generous, endured less depression (Kaushal et al., 2021), have lower suicide rates (Kim et al., 2021), and enjoyed a reduced risk of Alzheimer's (Conger, 2010) than those who do not attend church (Charles et al., 2021; Hungerman, 2020). There are many proven health benefits connected to regular church attendance, including a reduction in stress and a 55% decrease in mortality risk (Bruce et al., 2017), reduced depression (Orr et al., 2019), and greater levels of happiness (Marshall, 2019). Jones (2021) found during the pandemic that the only demographic that appeared to avoid a decline in their mental health were those who attended in-person worship. Religious institutions can provide spiritual guidance and hope, a sense of belonging, and material support during periods of hardship (Hungerman). The myriad of benefits simply adds to the argument for engagement in weekly worship.

Significance of the Study

The value of this study is found in three areas. First, this current study provides a deeper understanding of the pastoral leadership practices being successfully implemented by contemporary pastors that are resulting in church growth. Second, this current study provides replication; the leadership experiences of pastors who have successfully grown their churches are shared for other pastors who desire to develop leadership strategies to grow their churches. Third, this current study provides value for the theological education or training processes of future pastors.

Understanding

Van Wynen and Niemandt (2020) insightfully reminded us that deep down, leaders have known a day is coming when what is currently working will no longer work. Both Bolsinger and Penno (2017), and Ham (2012), prior to COVID, suggested that the new era church is headed towards needing a new leadership paradigm. Burch and Baumgartner, (2019) pointedly state that the fixes to church growth that have been in place are no longer working today. Many others have found the strategies provided by the church growth movement no longer work (Stetzer, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in this new era. Considering the impact of COVID-19 on the church, clergy leaders have one option: to learn how to lead in new ways (Jackson & Jessica, 2020). The world is rapidly changing; therefore, pastoral leadership skills should be adapted to the demands of constant change (Venter & Hermans, 2020). All individual leaders have a different set of leadership and personality qualities that they may draw from to shape the organization's direction (Kieta & Lao, 2020), yet if a church is not growing, an adaptation to the default leadership style of the senior leader may be the necessary fix (Kieta & Lao). Knowing that the success or failure of a church correlates with the ability of a leader to embrace change (Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020), old methods of leadership must be replaced with methods for the 21st century (Grandy, 2013).

Replication

The current study did not want simply to understand the principles that distinguish effective leaders from ineffective leaders; this research desires to equip other senior pastors so that they will be more prepared to lead their church to growth. The first point of this study was to identify the leadership practices enacted by senior pastors of growing

churches in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States. It is crucial to identify and equip leaders with the information, skills, and abilities necessary to lead a church to experience church vitality in today's culture (Venter & Hermans, 2020; Watt, 2014). Ham (2012) supported this claim that "if the church wants to experience growth, it definitely should have excellent and appropriate leadership in the changing world" (p. 90). As for leadership principles, Butler and Herman (1999) shared that a key challenge in any study of leadership effectiveness is that of distinguishing the practices and styles of highly effective leaders from those who are less effective. Effective leadership practices will enable church leaders to be better equipped to lead their churches effectively. In fact, "leadership and its practices are key issues in church growth and impact on the world" (Ham, p. 190). In an ever-changing society and particularly a post-COVID world, we must identify principles that lead to church growth.

Training

A large percentage of ministers and pastors feel their theological education was inadequate to prepare them for reality of the pastorate (Strunk et al., 2017). Many are opting to leave the ministry, which only deepens the crisis by placing the church in great jeopardy of a leadership vacuum (Dreyer, 2015). There is a need to more adequately prepare those called for the realities of leading a church (Strunk et al.). Houseal (2020) found that 10% of pastors in The Church of the Nazarene are having difficulty continuing in ministry as a direct result of financial and mental issues brought on by the pandemic. A study by Barna Group (2020b) found that 23% of pastors purport a lack of leadership training is a major concern facing the church.

Population and Sample

Population

The population of this current study included 12 senior pastors who were currently serving in in The Church of the Nazarene from eight different states within in the United States, including; Arizona, California, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. Schooch (2020) as well as Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that while most researchers choose between four and five cases, choosing more may increase generalizability. Thus, this current study chose to study twelve participants for the purpose of greater generalization.

Sample

The participants were narrowed through purposeful sampling with the help of the research department of the denomination. Purposeful sampling has been proven effective in collective case studies (Schooch, 2020). Purposeful sampling is choosing a participant who meets a certain set of criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and helps one to focus in-depth on a phenomenon, whereas probability sampling that is found in quantitative research does not take into account if the participants meet a certain criterion (Schooch). The participant criterion for this current study will be explored in detail in chapter III. Snowball sampling was also employed in the selection of the participants. Snowball sampling, employed when participants may be hard to find, is when the researcher elicits participants to help identify other potential participants for the researcher to recruit (Adams & Lawrence, 2019).

Research Questions

To determine common leadership practices used by senior pastors in The Church of the Nazarene denomination in the United States to lead their churches to growth, this research will be guided by the following central research question, and three research sub questions:

Central Research Question

The central research question that this research sought to answer is as follows:
What are the effective leadership commonalities among twelve senior pastors from The Church of the Nazarene denomination in the United States that had a direct impact on the growth of their churches? Schooch (2020) explained that research questions should be broad and focused on what the study ultimately wants to learn. Three such sub questions have been developed for this research.

Research Sub Questions

1. What is the common leadership style(s) among twelve senior pastors in the church of the Nazarene whose churches are experiencing growth?
2. What are the common leadership practices among the senior pastors that they believe have been effective in driving the growth of their churches?
3. What common leadership practices do the senior pastors believe will emerge as vital for church growth post-COVID?

Description of Terms

Church. The church is the body of Christ comprised of all those who confess the Lordship of Christ and who seek to live as his true disciples and ambassadors (Baron & Pali, 2021; Pakpahan, 2022).

Church Growth. Science that investigates the nature, function, and health of the Christian church as it relates specifically to the effective implementation of God's commission to 'make disciples of all nations' (Percy, 2020). An increase, development, expansion, and maturity of the church that is spiritual, numerical increase, social and economic (Demesi et al., 2022).

Clergy Effectiveness. The ability of the senior pastor of a local congregation to lead the congregation to agreed upon goals and objectives (Dobrotka, 2021).

Leader. A person or individual who influences a group of individuals to work toward a common goal (Northouse, 2019).

Senior Pastor. One who is divinely placed by God to lead and is responsible for a congregation. The term pastor in this study refers to the senior person placed in a position to guide the church organization through a shared vision. The spiritual leader of a church and the highest official of a local, independent assembly. Often called an overseer or undershepherd of Jesus Christ (Palmer-Atkins, 2018).

The Church of the Nazarene. A Christian denomination in the Wesleyan Arminian theological tradition with historical roots in John Wesley's Methodist revival and the American Holiness movement of the late 19th century (Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021).

Vitality. An indicator of church growth that refers to both church health (qualitative) and numerical growth (quantitative). (Hutabarat & Majilang, 2022)

Summary

Skillful and effective leadership is crucial to church growth (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b; Keita & Lao, 2019). The impact and growth of a church, while not ignoring the work of God, is directly related to the leadership practices of the senior pastor. Having

strong, effective, and proven principles adds to the body of literature and serves foundational for pastors in their endeavor to lead their churches to growth. This qualitative collective case study explores and shares those principles for others to replicate.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter II reviews the literature surrounding the problem of local church decline and, more specifically, the pastoral leadership practices needed to address this decline. Many studies exist that measure church health, church growth, pastor leadership styles, and pastoral effectiveness (Cincala, 2020; Earls, 2019; Ferreira & Chipenya, 2021b; Nainggolan, 2020; Percy, 2020; Ruff, 2020). Yet, research concerning pastoral leadership principles that directly impacted church growth is deficient (Fowler et al., 2019; Keita & Lao, 2020; Rogers, 2021; Wollschleger, 2018). Church leadership, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, is especially deficient in research due to the pandemic occurring so recently that scholarly research is just now beginning to trickle out. In the following sections, the scholarly literature of interest to this research will be explored.

An in-depth search for the relevant literature concerning the research question was executed across multiple databases over a timeframe of many months until saturation was acquired. Saturation occurs when you can no longer find information to add to the research and no new ideas emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary databases and search engines used were Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ProQuest. Most of the cited works are within five years of the start of this study, in 2020. However, a few very pertinent older works that have yet to be updated have been included. The primary search

terms were church growth, church vitality, church health, church decline, effective pastoral leadership, church membership decline, church leadership, pastoral leadership principles, and pastoral leadership style. Additionally, articles written by church growth experts have been referred to as the COVID-19 pandemic is so recent that peer reviewed scholarly articles are in scarce supply.

The State of the Church

God desires his church to grow both numerically and spiritually (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021a; Ilarious, 2020; Nainggolan, 2020). God's desire for his church to grow numerically is an essential biblical theme (Ferreira & Chipenyu). Jesus, in giving a vision for his church in parabolic form, Luke 14:23 said "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled." (New International Version Bible [New International Version]). Jesus reiterated his desire for the church to grow, in giving The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, as he challenged the church to achieve growth and "Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (New International Version).

The numerical growth of the early church was rapid (Hutabarat & Majilang, 2022), and while impossible to calculate exactly (Dreyer, 2012), can be found in several of the biblical epistles including, Philippians 1:5, 1 Corinthians 1:5-6, Ephesians 1:15~16, Colossians 1:4, 6, and Thessalonians 1:6-10, but is most clearly seen in the book of Acts. Acts 1:15 (New International Version) informed us the church began with 120 people. On the Day of Pentecost, in Acts 2:41, about 3000 people were added to the church in a single day. Acts 2:47 indicated the state of the early church as is written, "The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." By Acts 4:4, the

church had grown to 5000 men, and in Acts 5:14 we read again that the church continued to grow numerically. In Acts 6:1 we read the church membership was increasing, and in Acts 6:7 we learned that the church continued to grow at a rapid pace. In Acts 9:31 we read that the church was increasing in great numbers and Acts 11:21-26 indicated that the church grew by a great number of new converts. Acts 11:25 explained to us that the numeral growth was so rapid that Barnabas needed Paul's help to teach them and in Acts 14:1 we read that a "great number" of people were added when the church spread to Iconium. When the church spread to Derby, in Acts 14:21, we read again that a "large number" joined the church and Acts 16:5 tells us that the early church continued to grow "daily in numbers." In Acts 19:18-26 the church had spread to Ephesus, and we read that "many" and "large numbers" joined the church. Also, when Paul returned to Jerusalem in Acts 21:10 he reported that "many thousands" had joined the church. In fact, the early church grew so rapidly it became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire within five centuries (Dreyer, 2015).

Not only does God desire his church to grow, God is also the one who ultimately causes his church to grow (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b; Giffard, 2019). Likewise, scripture pointed to this reality as Acts 2:47, which has already been noted above, told us that it was the Lord who added to their numbers daily. In describing his firsthand eyewitness of the exponential growth of the early church, the Apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 2:19, "God causes it to grow," and again in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "It was God who made it grow" (New Living Translation [New Living Translation]).

Despite God's desire for his church to grow, and that He is the cause for His church to grow, when it comes to current church growth in the United States there is a

steady stream of bad news (Ruff, 2020). Decline in worship attendance in the United States is widely known and lamented among churchgoers and clergy (Hungerman, 2020; Ruff, 2020). The Protestant church in America is declining rapidly (Hout, 2017) despite having a strong church growth theory that has been alive and well for 40 years (Dreyer, 2015). The research on this decline is plentiful and can be found in various research projects, as much has been written on the subject (Thiessen et al., 2018).

About when this decline began in America, the following studies attempted to give clarity. Fowler et al. (2019) claimed church attendance in the Western Hemisphere has been declining for decades. Davis-Olds (2017) claimed church attendance in the USA has been in decline since the year 2000. Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021b) proffer that the countries in the Western Hemisphere have the world's largest figures of membership decline. Budijanto (2020) shared that between the years 2016-2018, 39% of churches in America had stagnant growth. Hamid (2021) indicated that Protestant church membership was relatively constant at 70% from 1937-1998. At this point, America began its sharpest decline in history (Hamid); however, according to De Jong (2018), that number dropped to 50% in 2003, and in 2018 it had dwindled to 36%. Ruff (2020) concluded that this decline will cause a third of the churches of all denominations in America to close within the next ten years. Black (2021) reported that 89% of people in the US identified as Christians in 1980, then by the year 2000 that number had dwindled to 80%, and by 2018 that number had dropped further to 67%. Black noted that a trajectory of this magnitude means that the church in 2050 will be half the size of what it was in 1990. Kramer (2022) confirmed Black's prediction and noted that Christians

currently comprise 64% of all Americans and indicates that the current downward trend may result in the church shrinking from 35% to 54% of all Americans by 2070.

This study was interested in learning from pastors in growing churches. It is worth noting, then, that some churches have been defying the trends and are experiencing growth in recent days (Davis-Olds, 2017; Fowler et al., 2019; McMullin, 2013; Penfold, 2019). Some, prior to the pandemic, were even experiencing substantial growth (Wollschleger, 2018). Earls (2019) reported 6 in 10 Protestant churches are in decline and Earls (2019) conducting a study for Lifeway research found that 65% of churches are declining or plateaued and 35% are growing. The aforementioned statistics proffer that roughly 35-40% of churches have been growing to some degree. While the above research mainly refers to the pre-COVID pandemic, Morgan (2022) studying 315 churches found those churches grew their in-person worship by an average of 30% in the year 2022.

The research paints a clear picture that Protestant church attendance overall is in decline (Earls, 2019). Perhaps people should not be surprised at the current crisis of church decline as the church has always lived with some sort of crisis (Dreyer, 2015; Garba, 2021). History has shown that the church has always encountered increased opposition and threats (Dreyer) and yet has been strengthened through the opposition as the resistance removes nominal members while emboldening the others (Pali, 2021). During times of threat, the church witness is strongest and must maintain its missional identity despite opposition or threats (Shambare & Kgatla, 2018). In the book of Acts persecution broke out against the church to which the church responded by meeting in homes, resulting in growing the church through the first three centuries (Arthur, 2021;

Simanjuntak, et al., 2021) even in the face of hostility, confiscation of property, imprisonment, torture, and execution (Garba, 2021).

Decline in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States

The research in this manuscript specifically addresses membership decline among churches in the United States in The Church of the Nazarene denomination. The annual church statistical report provided by the denomination for the past six years paints a picture that the denomination is sliding towards stagnation (Black, 2021).

Table 1. Decline in the Church of the Nazarene (Church of the Nazarene, 2021).

	2021	2018	2015
Membership	592437	628339	648296
Organized Churches	4512	4602	4660
Elders	11040	11014	10793
Conversins	23022	46835	49417
Baptisms	7735	17296	18985
Children	152940	192126	200455
Teens	100388	117903	125448
Adults	439198	487698	468698
Weekly Worship	423529	445247	475253
Total Income	\$711,844,225	\$737,997,598	\$733,606,565

The data in Table 1 show that in just six years the worship attendance has declined by 51,724 people. That is roughly the same size as the cities such as Sarasota, Florida, or Manhattan, Kansas, or Battle Creek, Michigan, or the seating capacity at Churchill Downs. Figure 1 shows, in this same period 279,019 people experienced conversion and 105,128 were baptized. Those two numbers alone should be driving attendance upward, yet the decline remains, indicating an inadequate discipleship model focused on making converts rather than making disciples (Black 2021; Reinbold, 2015). Figure 1 shows the numbers for adults is growing while kids and teens are declining in membership, indicating the active membership may be aging.

This decline has not always been the case in The Church of the Nazarene, whose first three decades in existence saw a 100% increase in membership and grew to 301,675 members and 4,597 churches in just 50 years (Black, 2021). During the years of 1948-1956 the denomination started over 1000 new churches alone (Black). Membership growth began to decline in the mid-20th century (Black). During the 1990's the denomination in the USA/Canada experienced a season of growth and expanded by 12% (Black). However, from 2005-2015 the church in the USA/Canada region returned to a season of decline (Black), which Figure 1 indicates is an ongoing trend.

Church Metrics

What is church growth, and how is it quantified? Several definitions emerged in this literature review. The pioneer of the modern church growth movement, Wagner (1979), defined church growth as the science that investigates the nature, function, and health of a church related to God's commission to make disciples. More precisely Wagner stated that church growth involves everything that brings a person into a relationship with Jesus and into church membership. Nainggolan (2020) defined church growth should balance the church's quantity, quality, and complexity as an organization. With that in mind, church growth is more than just an interest in numbers; it includes a concern for the quality of disciples being made. Church growth includes the increase, development, expansion, and maturity of the church (Demesi et al., 2022)

There are four metric areas of church growth (Hayward, 2018; Marpaung, 2020). The first metric area, biological growth, occurs when children of church members grow up and enter the church through a profession of faith (Hayward; Marpaung). The second area is transfer growth (Hayward; Marpaung). Transfer growth occurs when a church

receives members from another Christian church, often at the expense of other churches, which is at least in part responsible for the decline of smaller churches (Marpaung).

Transfer growth may increase the rolls of a local church, but it does not enlarge the kingdom of God, as it is at the expense of other churches (Marpaung). The third area is restorative growth, which occurs when lapsed Christians return to active engagement and attendance (Hayward; Marpaung). Black (2021) contended this often happens when young adults who were raised in the church have children and want to make sure their children are raised in church. The fourth and final area is conversion growth (Hayward; Marpaung). Conversion occurs when individuals make a first-time profession of faith and place their faith in the Lord Jesus as Savior (Penfold, 2019). Earls (2019) reported that rapid growth through conversion is currently uncommon. The healthiest of churches grow from all four of the above categories (Penfold), while an organization that is not doing well may fail in several, or all, of the categories (Black).

In answering the question concerning what quantifies church growth, Penfold (2019) provided the most thorough numerical description by clarifying that a growing church experiences losses and gains every year. According to his research, healthy churches show a 5% cumulative gain every year while, on average, a church will typically lose 10% of their worship attendance annually: 1% to death, 6% to transfers, and 3% to dropouts. Healthy churches typically see the following gains in a typical year: 5% conversion growth, 2.5% biological growth, 7.5% transfer growth (Penfold). A growing church, therefore, will lose about 10% per year but will offset that decline with a 15% gain, resulting in a 5% growth rate (Penfold). Of course, some churches will far exceed this rate (Penfold).

There are two primary ways a church can obtain growth externally: conversion or transfer (Davis et al., 2010). Conversion growth is an indicator of the success a church has experienced in reaching into its community and winning people to Christ (Davis et al.; Marpaung, 2020; Penfold, 2019). Conversion growth is the growth that most excites both churchgoers and pastors alike (Davis et al.; Marpaung; Penfold). Transfer growth occurs when attendees from one church decide to move to a new church (Penfold,). Many churches are growing simply by members switching churches (Davis et al.). Black (2021) shared that most churches view any kind of growth, including transfers, as positive. Yet, not every pastor agrees that transfer growth is a sign of church health as this kind of growth is absent of conversions and baptisms (Dunaetz & Priddy, 2013; Penfold). In the business world, conversion growth would be akin to reaching into new markets in business, while transfer growth would be akin to reaching into existing markets (Davis et al.). The COVID-19 pandemic caused many people to transfer to a new church as the associational bonds with a church were weakened (Higgins & Djupe, 2022) as tensions rose from disagreements about wearing masks, vaccines, social distancing, race relations, and political divide.

Transfer growth may lead an individual church to experience numerical growth, but overall, it does not add to the kingdom. Additionally, transfer growth is widely acknowledged as a leading factor for the success of mega-churches (Davis, Bell, & Payne, 2010). A megachurch is defined as a church with 2000 or more regular attendees (Symons & Maddox, 2020). Transfers may be due to Christians moving from one area to another but also are the result of Christians changing churches for social or doctrinal reasons as well as the preaching, a great youth ministry program, a home school network,

and even the personality of the pastor (Penfold, 2019). The success of the mega church is a false perception that the church overall is growing (Black, 2021). Church affiliation, therefore, is seen as a choice (Roozen, 2015). Member transfers have become so common that the phrase *church shopping* is being used to describe this phenomenon (Roozen). Congregations that *stick out* tend to attract these consumers (Roozen).

Catalytic Events for Church Growth in America

The history of church growth in the United States is worth exploring. Since the days of Puritan mandatory worship attendance ended, there have been multiple catalytic events, both spiritual and secular, that have driven Americans to worship. Though in each case it has been shown that attendance levels quickly resumed to the levels prior to the event in question. Events of national magnitude often bring people to church in the short term, but those attendees quickly disappear when things get back to normal as was the case after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) (Uecker, 2008). Uecker found that on the first Sunday after 9/11, worship attendance grew by 6% in America, but by November, attendance had returned to pre-9/11 levels. Epidemics are also typically followed by rapid growth followed by a period of decline (Hayward, 2018). Religious behavior is not usually affected in the long term by single events but rather over time.

A series of religious events called the Great Awakenings drove the American people to worship. Such events resulted from deliberate evangelistic efforts in converting individuals to Christianity rather than attracting individuals to a specific Christian denomination. The First Great Awakening, which occurred between 1700 and 1750, was one such event (Fogel, 2000; Wrench, 2021). The First Great Awakening was marked by the Calvinist predestination doctrine, which recognized many sinners may be predestined

for salvation and introduced revival meetings that placed an emphasis on spiritual rebirth (Fogel). By the time of the Second Great Awakening, which took place from 1795-1835 (Wrench), the majority of believers in America had abandoned the strictness of Calvinism in search of new inspiration for their faith (Kalinichenko, 2016). The Second Great Awakening was marked by personal responsibility and the doctrine of Armenianism, which preached that the path to salvation was open to everyone (Fogel, Kalinichenko). Americans flocked to these churches, camp meetings, and the circuit riders in droves. The Third Great Awakening took place from 1890-1930 (Butler, 2000; Fogel), and gained traction by emphasizing social gospel in response to social sin (Fogel).

The rise of Pentecostalism, marked by the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles from 1906-1909 (Keita & Lao, 2019; Wrench, 2021) and the Hot Springs Revival in Arkansas in 1914 (Colby, 2020), proved catalytic in driving Americans to worship. Pentecostalism gained mass appeal among those on the fringes of society (Keita & Lao). They were influential in the start of several denominations, such as the Church of God in Christ, Assemblies of God, and the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (Colby). Pentecostalism accounts for 25% of the 2 billion Christians in the world today (Keita & Lao).

The church growth movement was pioneered by Donald McGavran in the 1960s (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020) and was subsequently made popular by Peter Wagner in the 1970s. The movement exploded on the evangelical scene in the 1980s, leading to the growth of many churches (Stetzer, 2021). The church growth movement also produced the creation of extensive literature to help churches be effective in their mission and

achieve growth (Bretherton & Dunbar), and many practitioners and consultants of church-growth (Dunaetz, 2021). The movement was heavily criticized for valuing numerical growth over spiritual growth, yet the purpose of many church growth movement proponents was increasing converts (Stetzer, 2006).

Historically, calamities such as the black plague in medieval Europe, the 1918 flu in South Africa, and the 9/11 attacks in New York drove people to worship (DeFranza et al., 2021). In addition to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, there have been other crisis events that have driven Americans to worship. The attack on Pearl Harbor was one such event in which, during the months following the attack, 47% of Americans indicated an increase in their interest in religion (Snape, 2017). Likewise, in the days immediately following World War II, the United States experienced a resurgence, however short-lived, in worship attendance among evangelical churches (Fowler et al., 2019). Arthur (2021) wrote of the 165 AD Plague of Gale, in which it is believed nearly a quarter of the population of Rome died, and the 251 AD measles epidemic, which took the lives of two-thirds of the people of Alexandria, Egypt. Both cases resulted in an increase in Christian adherents due to the inadequate explanations for the plagues by Pagan religions in comparison to the hope-filled explanations offered by Christianity.

The Causes of Church Decline

It is important to explore the reasons for church decline to provide the context for the research questions in this dissertation. Church growth strategies will not work unless we know the real reasons for attendance decline (Burch & Baumgartner, 2019). A literature review from relevant research has shown multiple reasons for the general decline in church attendees, which can be delineated into internal and external categories

(Jo et al., 2021). Internal categories are those elements within a church while external factors are found in society (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020; Hayward, 2005).

Internal Reasons for Decline

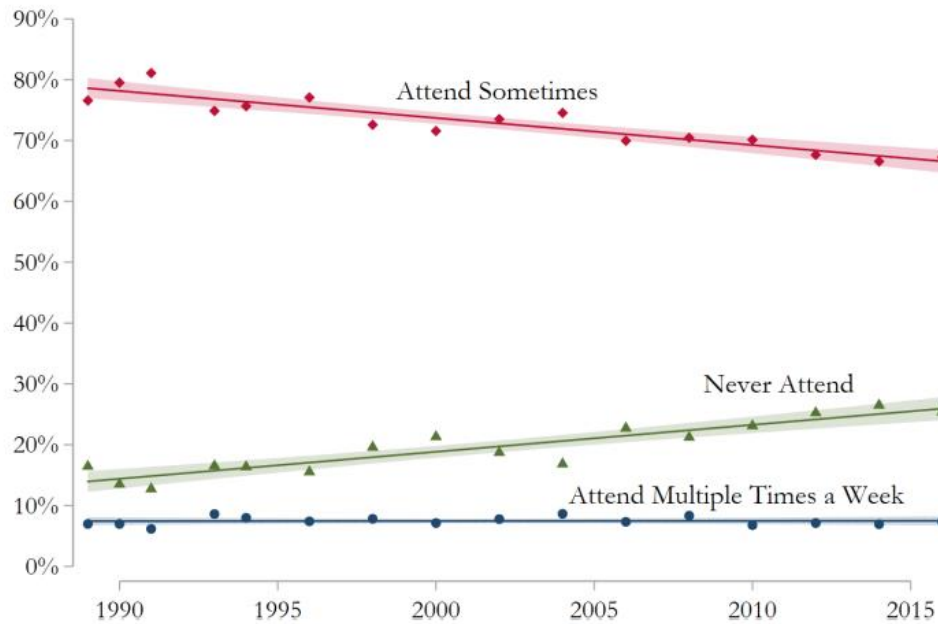
Internal factors are the issues that have proven to be influential in church decline, but the church has some control over them (Thiessen et al., 2018). The following section outlines those factors.

Frequency

A widely known and documented reason for church decline is the declining frequency of worship attendance among committed believers (Jacobi et al., 2022). McMullin (2013) reported that the number of Christians in America has not decreased but the frequency of their worship attendance has as churchgoers have embraced a nonchalant attitude towards church attendance. Smith et al. (2019) reported that Americans who attend worship weekly has been declining since the 1970's when attendance was 38% compared to 28% today. Vaters (2019) reported that active members, as recent as 20 years ago, were those who attended church three times a week, but now they attend only three times per month. Jones (2021) said only 20% of churchgoers attend worship three times per month, and only a mere 4% attend 48 or more times per year. Barna Group Research (2020b) found that 45% of practicing Christians attended worship weekly in 1993 while only 29% did so in 2019. Earls, (2021) noted that in 2019, 56% of committed believers attended church four times per month, 30% attended two to three times per month, and 7% attended once per month. Schnabel and Bock (2017) shared their findings for the decline in worship attendance in the following graph:

Figure 1

Religious Service Attendance Frequency Over Time



Note: From *The persistent and exceptional intensity of American religion: A response to recent research* by Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, *Sociological Science*, 2017, p. 690.

There are likely many reasons for infrequent worship attendance, including: options people have for travel, work schedules, kids' activities, military duties, divorced families who share kids on alternate weekends, chronic illness, online options that make staying at home more manageable, and a lack of social pressure to feel guilty about skipping church (Smith et al., 2019). Fisher (2022) reports the rise in attendance of professional football, which predominantly happens on Sunday, has increased in 2022 to an all-time high, which most certainly affects competition for worship attendance. McMullin (2013) reported that the repeal of blue laws, giving people more Sunday shopping choices, directly resulted in a decrease in frequency of attendance. Earls, (2021) discovered a bit of good news in finding that 23% of churchgoers plan to attend more

often than they did prior to the pandemic, indicating that frequency of attendance might emerge stronger after the pandemic, as with other national crises mentioned previously.

Scandals

Scandals are incidents that negatively impact the public perception towards the church such as corruption, embezzlement, allegations of sexual abuse, and even rape convictions of church leaders (Gaillardetz, & Gaillardetz, 2020; Hungermann, 2020; Jo, 2021). While some lay persons are able to persevere in their faith in the wake of a scandal by a church leader, many grow discouraged to the extent that they lose their faith (Obiorah, 2020). When sin occurs in the church and it is covered up, and when Christians participate in almost every evil of the world, it is no wonder that the spiritually lost are not attracted to the church (Black, 2021).

Pastoral dependency

Pastoral dependency is a good example of an internal factor that limits growth. Many churches are stymied due to a dependency on the pastor, limiting the congregants' participation and driving the congregation to become consumers and enjoyers in which they cannot live out their faith without the involvement of the clergy (Simanjuntak, et al., 2021). The early church had a greater dependency on the members of the church than the Apostles (Simanjuntak, et al.).

A Maintenance Mentality

A maintenance mentality is prioritizing church programs and facilities over evangelism, also results in church decline (Nichols, 2007). A church that finds itself in maintenance mode is ignoring its calling, has lost its relevance, and is entangled in spiritual stagnancy due to its obsession with institutional concerns (Baron & Pali, 2021).

Rather than being maintenance driven, a church must be missional driven, thus giving attention to God's concerns rather than their own (Baron & Pali). The post-COVID church should emerge as a church whose mission is God's mission, not merely the activities of the church (Mpofu, 2020).

Ineffective Pastoral Leadership

Ineffective pastoral leadership further contributes to the decline in church membership (Fowler et al., 2019). Ineffective leadership in a church can be understood as a pastor's lack of vision, purpose, and direction (Nichols, 2007). The Apostle Paul highlighted that leadership gifts were given to some by God as a means for church growth, and we can therefore conclude that church decline and growth is directly tied to the leader's willingness or failure to spearhead church growth (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021a). It should be further noted that vast numbers of pastors feel ill-prepared and leave the ministry, placing the church in great jeopardy of a leadership vacuum (Dreyer, 2015). Barna (2021b) discovered that 38% of pastors have considered quitting the full-time ministry in 2021 alone, an increase of 9% over the previous year. Strunk et al. (2017) found that most seminary graduates do not feel completely prepared for the realities of being a pastor. Fowler et al. found that ineffective leadership is a contributor to diminished membership numbers. Barna Group noted that, more than ever, the church needs resilient leaders who are committed to effective leadership, noting that the research on this topic is scarce and should be studied further.

Lack of Adaptation

Both Fowler et al. (2019) and Allen et al. (2013) claimed that the problem of church decline may be due to church leaders' unwillingness to adapt to current trends.

Davis-Olds (2017) indicated that churches are notoriously resistant to change and have failed to do so while the religious landscape in America has shifted. Davis-Olds specifically discovered that churches resist change in worship style, programming, and theological emphasis, despite the findings that growth and vitality are directly tied to innovation in these areas. Haskell et al. (2016a) suggested that older churches have a harder time adapting to changing circumstances because of accumulated institutional patterns and older facilities. As the congregation ages, it becomes harder to adapt to change (Dougherty et al., 2015). Christianity must maximize every opportunity provided by society to improve Christian fellowship (Garba, 2021). Mills (2016) added that change will not occur until there is a sense of urgency within the church. Both Dewerse and Osborne (2020) and Pillay (2021) noted that COVID-19 is providing that sense of urgency by giving the church the gift to realign and reimagine how we do church.

Lack of Prayer

Prayer, an internal factor that a church has some control over, is a key predictor of church growth as it is an indicator that a church is reliant upon the power of the Holy Spirit over human intellect and ingenuity (Dunaetz, 2014; Theissen et al., 2018). Where there is little prayer, there should be little expectation for growth (Haskell, 2016b). Dunaetz and Priddy (2013) suggested that a growing church may be pushed to prayer out of a dependency on God for ministering to newcomers. Ellis (2006) noted that a lack of commitment to prayer is one of the characteristics of an unhealthy church.

Outreach over Evangelism

Choosing outreach over evangelism is an additional internal factor for the decline in church attendance (Dunaetz & Priddy, 2013). According to Dunaetz and Priddy, some

congregations have fallen victim to thinking that evangelism and outreach are the same things, while they are very different. Outreach develops a relationship with people in the community, which does not necessarily lead people to Jesus and church attendance (Dunaetz & Priddy). Outreach ministries can lead a church to evangelism, but they too often drain the church of time and energy for evangelism (Dunaetz, 2014). Outreach ministries that are wasteful and ineffective for a church on mission should be eliminated (Dunaetz). Programs often make the church members feel good about themselves, but they do not make Christ-like disciples (Dunaetz). Nichols (2007) indicated that many declining churches display apathy over the spiritually lost in their community.

External Reasons for Decline

External factors are issues that influence church decline to which the church has little or no ability to influence or control (Thiessen et al., 2018). Powell et al., (2019) clarified that external factors are trends happening in the whole of society that affect church participation. Most churchgoers of declining churches have been found to cite external factors, such as secular activities, as the cause of their churches' decline and largely ignore the internal factors (McMullin, 2013).

COVID

The impact of COVID on worship has negatively affected in-person worship attendance by roughly 30%-50% of Pre-pandemic attendance numbers (Adamy, 2021; Barna Group, 2020a). Many people are avoiding worship gatherings as they believe them to be super-spreaders of COVID (Baron & Pali, 2021).

Transfer Growth

Penfold (2019) indicated that growing churches can contribute on average 7.5% of their annual growth to transfers. Transfer growth, when members of one congregation transfer to another congregation, drives the increase of one church at the expense of another (Marpaung, 2020). Transfer growth happens for a number of reasons including, the preaching, a desirable youth ministry program, a strong homeschool network, and even the pastor's personality (Penfold). Dunaetz and Priddy (2013) found that pastors who agreed that transfer growth is a sign of congregational health had faster growing churches than those who disagreed. Davis et al. (2010) shared that transfer growth (60%) is acknowledged as a leading factor for the success of mega-churches, rather than conversions (40%).

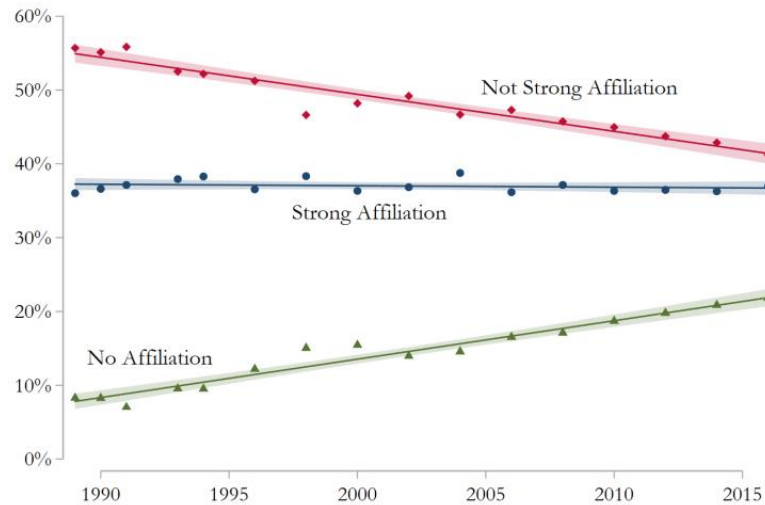
The Rise of The Nones

A national surge of people identifying themselves as the Nones is another external factor largely contributing to church decline (Hamid, 2021). The Nones received this nomenclature because they answer "none" when asked about their religious affiliation (Hungerman, 2020). Those who identify in this manner are otherwise known as the unaffiliated (Schnabel and Bock, 2017). The unaffiliated provide the most extreme evidence of decline in worship adherence and religious affiliation in the United States (Hout, 2017). As expected, this group does not attend worship (Gallup, 2021). There has been a dramatic rise in the past 15 years in the number of individuals who self-identify in this manner (De Jong, 2018; Hamid), resulting in 18% of American adults who were raised in a religious tradition but now describe themselves as unaffiliated (Haskell et al., 2016). During the past 30 years, the United States has experienced a sharp increase in the

number of Americans who self-identify as being religiously unaffiliated, from 6% in 1991 to 23% in recent days (Saiya, 2021). Burge (2020) confirmed this statistic, 23.3%, and comments that this proportion equals the number of evangelical Christians in America. Similarly, Gallup (2012) reveals that the percentage of unaffiliated people grew from 8% in 1998 to 21% in 2021. According to Gallup, this group now makes up every 1 in 5 Americans and is equal to the number of evangelicals or Catholics in the United States. The rise in the unaffiliated has occurred even though the American population has experienced growth during the period (Saiya, 2021). Figure two below, from Schnabel and Bock (2017), indicates the rise of the *Nones* both statistically and visually.

Figure 2

Strength of Affiliation Over Time



*Note: From *The persistent and exceptional intensity of American religion: A response to recent research* by Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, *Sociological Science*, 2017, p. 688.*

Reversion

Reversion occurs when believers revert into being unbelievers (Hayward, 2018). While there may be many reasons for a person to experience reversion, Jo et al. (2021) indicated this happens through a loss of evangelical enthusiasm, meaning the convert has lost excitement in their faith.

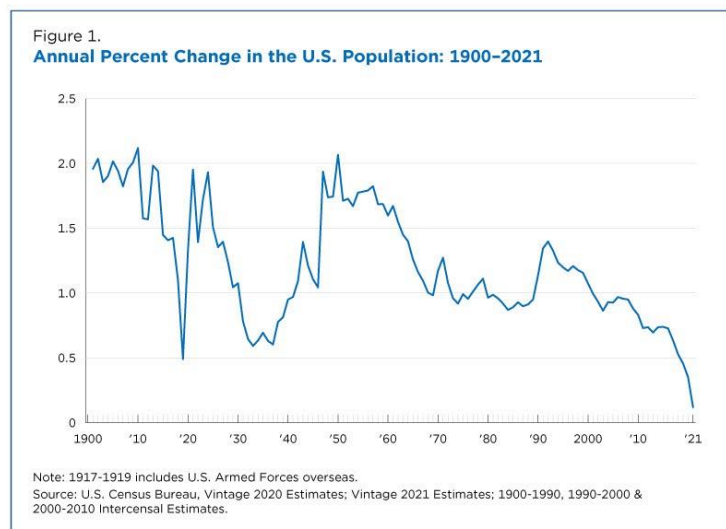
Population Birth Rate

The drop in the national birth rate has also impacted church decline (Hayward, 2005). The birth rate began declining in the 1960s (Dunaetz, 2014; Watkins, 1993). Simply put, fewer people today translate to fewer potential churchgoers (Wulff, 2011). The year 2020 saw the sharpest decline in births since 1965 (Smith, 2021). The decline in birthrate makes it more difficult for churches to grow through conversion growth, transfer growth, and biological growth (Wulff). While the population has increased by a mere

1.1% (Penfold, 2019), the recent development of evangelical churches is not keeping pace with even such a low statistical bar (Penfold; Strunk et al., 2017). When a church's rate of new members is less than the population growth rate, it may survive but lose its market share (Hayward, 2020). The U.S. Census report in 2021 (see figure 3) indicated that the U.S. population rate grew .01% in 2021 which is slower than any year in the country's history (Rogers, 2021).

Figure 3

Annual Percent Change in the U.S. Population 1900-2021



Note: From COVID-19, Declining Birth Rates and International Migration Resulted in Historically Small Population Gains, 2021

(<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/12/us-population-grew-in-2021-slowest-rate-since-founding-of-the-nation.html>). In the public domain.

Secularization

The secularization of American society is also an external factor leading to the church decline (Schnabel & Bock, 2020; Van Ingen & Moor, 2015; Iyer, 2016). Few would disagree that the world is in a period of profound social change (Roozen, 2015).

Secularization is a shift from ecclesiastical authority and church creeds on ethical and economic thought to reason and sentiment (Iyer). Inge and Moor posit that secularization has caused the church to lose its dominant position in societal life and has been replaced by secular institutions. The secularization of society asserts that with the result of ongoing modernization and the advance of science, religion will become increasingly irrelevant in public and private life (Schnabel & Bock). In its traditional form and without innovation, the church is and will continue to find it increasingly difficult to achieve its mission and vitality in postmodern society (Dreyer, 2015). Hayward (2010) explained that secularization theory states that as society advances, churches will decline. Fowler et al. (2019) identified secularization as having a significant impact on diminished worship attendance. Schnabel & Bock identified that as modernization and science advance, religion will become increasingly irrelevant. Hungerman (2020), in a more recent article, echoed the finding that modernization tends to undermine religious activity. The secularization of society impacts all churches, but those most affected are traditional mainline Protestant churches (Dreyer). As society is increasingly becoming secular in general, Sunday is no longer considered a sacred day in America (McMullin, 2013). Societal evidence of this occurrence can be seen in many ways, including the elimination of blue laws in many areas, the increased scheduling of kids sports on Sundays, and the workweek no longer being limited to weekdays resulting in many who are required to work on Sunday (Hungermann; McMullen).

National Sentiment

Saiya (2021), found that countries that were friendly to Christianity had the most number of declining churches. Christians in these countries are not forced to have a deep

knowledge of their belief, nor do they need to have the ability to defend their faith in the marketplace of ideas (Saiya et al.). Saiya et al. found seven out of the ten countries from the fastest-growing Christian populations offer low to no official support for Christianity. Christianity does best when it must fend for itself, as seen most vividly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America where Christianity is growing the fastest (Dreyer, 2015; Garba 2021; Saiya, 2021). Christianity has progressed in these nations because it must compete with other faith traditions, not because it has a privileged position with the state (Saiya).

Sunday Competition

Competing Sunday activities is a commonly cited reason for church decline among churchgoers and even more widely cited by clergy (McMullen, 2013). The most frequently mentioned activities were children's sports, work schedules, and shopping options (McMullen). As a secular society becomes more secular, we should not be surprised that they schedule sporting events on Sunday (McMullen). Churches once were the center of society and community on Sunday, but now there is a lot of competition for people's time and attention (McMullen). Some pastors of growing churches believe activities on Sundays are not a battle to be won but are simply a societal reality that churches must help members navigate (McMullen).

Generational Trends

The exit of the protestant millennials, those born from 1981-1997, from the church must also be noted as an external factor for lack of church attendance (Puffer, 2018). According to Gallup (2021), only 36% of millennials are church members compared to 58% of baby boomers and 50% of generation X. Older generations are more likely to attend church than younger generations (Puffer). Francis and Village (2021)

theorized that the COVID pandemic had a powerful effect on aged people who may not return, leaving the church in desperate financial need, as this group largely funds the church through their financial donation. Thumma's (2021) research reminds us that those over 65 have increased from one quarter to one third of the average congregation and are often the most staunch financial supporters. As this age group dies off, the church will be left with diminishing financial resources (Thumma).

Disillusionment and Skepticism

Two features of our contemporary postmodern society are disillusionment and skepticism (Dreyer, 2015). According to Dreyer, ecclesial optimism is quickly disappearing. Fake healing ministries that encapsulate materialism, sham churches that encourage people to end medical treatments resulting in their death, and scandals within the church destroy its credibility, making many people disillusioned with the church (Dreyer, 2015; Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz, 2020). Despite these concerns, some can persevere in their faith, but many cannot (Obiorah, 2020). Adding to this disillusionment has been the rise of *Christian Nationalism* during COVID which is an ideology that advocates for a fusion of civic life in America with a specific Christian identity (Perry et al., 2020). Partisan politics, otherwise called sacralization, has also led many individuals to be disheartened with the church (Saiya et al., 2021). Saiya et al. found the increase in the number of religiously unaffiliated people is attributable partly to Christians attempting to gain or receive favor from the government. Conservative Christians became more engaged in politics in the 1970s to preserve their Christian values in society while claiming to *take America back for God* (Saiya et al.). The result was the church becoming embroiled in partisan politics (Saiya et al.). The phenomenon of intermingling of religion

and politics has caused many people to perceive the Christian faith as supporting particular political agendas (Saiya et al.) resulting in the repelling of the faith by with those who disagree with such a faith-driven political agenda (Saiya et al.). The consequences of politicized Christianity may create an appeal to conservatives but drives away liberals and moderates (Saiya et al.). The research from Saiya et al. extrapolates that Christian churches could redeem their witnesses by rejecting the pursuit of political privilege while declaring it incompatible with the gospel of Jesus, this illustrating that the Church takes seriously Jesus' proclamation that nothing will overcome His church (Saiya et al.). Snubbing political privilege would make Christians more reliant on the Holy Spirit (Saiya et al.).

All the above reasons may express the reality of the church, but they do not express God's vision for His church. God has given the church a mission to fulfill. We should find encouragement in remembering Jesus' words from Matthew 16:18, in which he declared, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (New International Version).

The Mission of the Church

We cannot talk about church growth without talking about its mission (Irawati, 2021). Ephesians 3:10 explained that God has chosen the Church as his means to carry out his redemptive purpose, so we should passionately desire to make it effective in its mission (Campbell, 2021; Stetzer, 2006). The word mission means *sending* and Christians understand the mission of the church to be that Christians are sent to spread the faith (Zandroto, 2021). The crisis of declining attendance that the church is facing is not really a crisis of growth, it is a crisis of mission in that the church is failing to meet

God's will that His church should grow (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021a). Some would call it a missiological problem (Ferreira & Chipenyu; McMullin, 2013). Ward (2021) said the church is experiencing *mission drift*, meaning a church often starts with a clear mission and over time slowly alters its trajectory unless its leaders purposefully prevent it. The church experiences mission drift when it is not doing what it is supposed to do, which is to share in Jesus' mission to bring everyone to the knowledge of God and the salvation He alone offers (Obiorah, 2020). Van Wynen and Niemandt (2020) aptly stated that God has a mission to redeem and restore creation and invite and call His followers to participate with Him in that mission. Because the church has forgotten its mission, it is struggling to maintain its vibrancy (Bazan, 2019). Because the Church is central to God's redemptive purpose, we should passionately desire to know how to make it more effective in its mission (Stetzer, 2006).

Jesus gave a clear vision for the church in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (New International Version). God has given the church the task of being an outpost of hope to a struggling and dying world (Mills, 2016). Yet, too often, the church is not living up to the mission to which it is called (Mills,).

Identity Determines Purpose

Once a church embraces its identity as a missional church sent to reach the lost, that church will finally know its purpose (Nel, 2017). The ultimate purpose of a church is not institutional perpetuation but to join in the *Mission Dei*, the mission of God in the world (Davis-Olds, 2017). Campbell (2021) explained that being missional is simply a

part of what God is and who the church ought to be. That is, a church that chooses to promote vitality. As Shambare and Kgatla (2018) highlighted, the calling of the church is to fulfill the mission of God. The church's obligation, by its very nature is to be missional (Pinkrah, 2020; Lawton, 2021). God is a sending God (Snook, 2019). The church is the only organization that exists to benefit people that are not yet members (Thiessen et al., 2018). God's primary work to transform the world and bring the lost to salvation is accomplished through the church (Shambare & Kgatla). The mission of the church, to encounter people with the Good News of God's transforming love, is intimately understood in both theology and in praxis (Shambare & Kgatla).

A church dies for many reasons including ignorance of God's mission, unwillingness to engage in God's mission, and even sinfulness (Bazan, 2019). A *missional church* is one whose identity lies in its participation in God's mission of creation, reconciliation, healing, and restoration of all creation (Snook). The church's mission can be summed up as the evangelism of the lost and the equipping of the saved (Allen, 2020). Churches that understand they are on a mission with God enjoy what Nel (2017) calls *missional satisfaction*, meaning much joy in being a church without embracing and fulfilling its mission. Therefore, reaching others gives a sense of accomplishment to the whole church, and that makes for joy (Nel). The greatest threat to the church is its ability to be the church because when the church ceases to be missional, it degenerates (Dreyer 2015).

Why do churches cease to be missional? Nel (2017) exposed three reasons from his research. First, it is easier to give birth than to raise the dead (Nel). People have long known that it is easier for new churches to grow than for older existing churches

(Dougherty et al., 2015). Second, members of declining churches generally accept that their church will not likely return to a missional mindset and will eventually close (Nel). Smaller churches do face an uphill battle when it comes to church vitality (Roozen, 2015). Third, members of existing congregations fear losing members and donors due to being transformed into a missional congregation (Nel).

Church Vitality

While there is much research on congregational vitality, there is not a shared definition (Thiessen et al., 2018). Church vitality indicates both a qualitative aspect, which refers to the health of a church, and a quantitative aspect, which is the numerical growth of a church (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021a; Irawati, 2021; Jo et al. 2021). Our missional God is concerned with both spiritual and numerical growth (Ferreira & Chipenyu). Thiessen et al. indicated that in the 1970s and 1980s, church vitality was measured primarily in a quantitative manner, but the *missional church* literature of the 2000s indicates a shift in this mentality to suggest a qualitative appraisal of transformed lives and communities are a better barometer of church growth and vitality. Quality and quantity are not in opposition to each other, yet when combined, they result in a healthy and growing church (Hutabarat & Majilang, 2022), while an exclusive focus on quality or quantity will produce an unhealthy church (Fierrieri & Chipenyu).

Roozen (2015) found that only 26.6% of churches express they are experiencing vitality. According to Mills (2016), often there is so little vitality in a church that members become accustomed to an atmosphere of ill health and toleration of dysfunction and unhealthy habits that a lack of vitality has become normalized. Church health is essential because it is the precursor to growth (Mills; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b). Only

after addressing the systemic issues related to health should the pastor/leader expect growth (Mills; Dunaetz, 2014). Church vitality should be a priority for pastors and leaders in religious organizations as a healthy church culture is the right environment where God can bring a harvest (Ferreira & Chipenyu).

Churches, by their very nature, are organizations that desire growth (Hayward, 2010; Hutabarat & Majilang, 2022), evidenced by the more than 2,000 Google searches for church growth ideas, ways to increase attendance, and strategies for reaching more people every month (Bradley, 2018). We expect churches to grow unless they are hampered by disease (Irawati, 2021). Numerical growth proffers that spiritual growth is happening and will be present as evidence of a church experiencing vitality (Mills, 2018; Snook, 2018). But which numerical metrics matter? Many metrics can be considered such as attendance, membership, financial giving, the number of disciples a church is producing, baptisms, volunteers, and conversions (Thiessen et al., 2018). Worship attendance is the main metric by which we gauge church growth (Hayward, 2010; Keita, 2020), and it will be the focus of this research. The literature review has illuminated several means by which a church will grow.

The Profile of a Growing Church

Church growth is due to multiple and complex factors (Powell et al, 2019). Yet, it is helpful to know what the literature reveals concerning the profile of a growing church. What follows is a synthesis of the available scholarly literature, the very few instruments developed that have demonstrated reliability and validity to provide characteristics of what has been both descriptive and predictive of what church growth is, and Peter Wagner's seven signs of a healthy church. The instruments consulted were as follows:

McIntosh's Nine Principles of Church Growth:

McIntosh's nine principles encompass the right premise, the right priority, the right process, the right power, the right pastor, the right people, the right philosophy, the right plan, the right procedure (McIntosh, 2021; Chang, 2021).

Natural Church Development's Eight Characteristics of Church Vitality

The eight characteristics of Natural Church Development include empowering leadership, gift-based ministry, passionate spirituality, effective structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, loving relationships (Cincala & Chase, 2018; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b; Mills, 2016; Powell et al., 2019).

The Australian National Church Life Survey's Ten Characteristics of Church Vitality

The 10 characteristics outlined by the Australian national church survey are a sense of vision or direction, a focus on those beyond church life, inviting people to church, an empowering leadership, looking after the young, contemporary worship, a sense of community, a lively faith, moving people toward commitment (Powell et al., 2019).

The Congregational Vitality Scale

The congregational vitality scale provides nine characteristics of church vitality, which are; God's presence, mission/purpose, leadership, relationships, attitudes/culture, local context, resources, governance and administration, programs (Bobbit et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2019).

Peter Wagner's Seven Vital Signs of a Health Church

Peter Wagner's (1979) signs of a healthy church are; a pastor whose dynamic leadership mobilizes the entire church into action for growth, a well-mobilized laity

which has discovered, has developed, and is using all the spiritual gifts for growth, a church big enough to provide the range of services that meet the needs of and expectations of all its members, a proper balance of the dynamic relationship between celebration, congregation and cell, a membership drawn primarily from one homogeneous unit, evangelistic methods that have proved to make disciples. Priorities arranged in biblical order (Percy, 2020).

Visionary Leadership

God uses leaders to grow His church (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b) and having the right pastor is key to church growth (Chang, 2021). Multiple research endeavors have confirmed that pastors who provide visionary leadership have churches that are growing (Ferreira & Chipenyu; Grandy, 2013; Nichols, 2007; Powell et al., 2019). Growing congregations have a leader who provides a vision that is clear on who they are, where they have come from, where they are going, and what they want to do (Haskell et al., 2016b; Thiessen et al., 2018; Thumma, 2021). A healthy congregation has a clear identity that is unique to them and distinguishes them rather than imitating other churches (Earls, 2016; Thiessen et al.). A strong sense of congregational identity that sends members out on individual and communal Christian missions is precisely the heart of church vitality (Snook, 2019). As Davis-Olds (2017) opined, this clarity of purpose is often called missional identity. The church is not a place, as in a building, but is a body of believers who share a common mission (Pakpahan et al., 2022). While a church has an identity that emerges from its theology, a church also has an identity that encompasses its unique personality, culture, and practices (Davis-Olds). Churches that understand and embrace their identity have a stronger foundation to engage in ministry (Davis-Olds). Church

leaders who do not have a clear vision will be ineffective (Irawati, 2021). One gift God gives to the church is the gift of leadership, defined as a God-empowered ability to set goals in accordance with God's purpose and to motivate others in the body of Christ to work together voluntarily and harmoniously to accomplish those goals for the glory of God (Watt, 2014). Churches without a leader who is convinced of God's will for the church will struggle (Estes, 2022).

Members of growing churches are significantly more likely to agree that their church has a clear mission and purpose, and they know that purpose to be evangelism (Haskell et al., 2016b). The growth of a church is a result of evangelism (Irawati, 2021). Further noted by Haskell et al., those from declining churches most often cited acts of social justice rather than evangelism as their church's purpose. Thiessen et al. (2018) noted that the missional church movement defined a vibrant church as one focused solely on the qualitative impacts on those beyond the walls of the local congregation. Often opposed to adapting marketing, programming, bigger buildings, larger budgets, more staffing, and numerical growth, those in the missional church movement focus on serving, caring for, and transforming the community at large (Thiessen et al.). As in many for-profit organizations, the mission is central to church leadership (Grandy, 2013). The problem is that most of the churches in America look more like America than the body of Christ. By having a clear vision, the congregation could choose easily between many good opportunities and the right opportunity (Nichols, 2006).

Relationships

Bobbitt et al. (2018) explained that growing congregations are marked by life-giving communal relationships with God, with one another, and with the local

community, all for the sake of God's mission of sharing the gospel. A communal relationship is one in which friends or family members feel some responsibility for each other's welfare and desire to help each other with no expectation of anything in return (Chen & Sriphon, 2021). Stewart (2021) remarked that these churches possess mutual care, concern, and generosity towards each other. Thiessen et al. (2018) referred to churches with these sorts of relationships as hospitable communities, where people experience deeper relational connections with each other in a safe and loving environment. Community of this nature is a catalyst for the flourishing of a congregation (Powell et al., 2019; Thiessen et al.). In addition, a truly gospel-centered church, marked by repentance and humility, encourages a spirit of hospitality that is welcoming to all (Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz, 2020).

In today's postmodern world, Christians will likely migrate to church communities that foster these genuine, meaningful, and caring relationships (Dreyer, 2015). During and following the COVID crisis, the church has seen a surge in online viewership (Jacobi et al., 2022); however, Giese (2020) indicates many believe that online worship is a poor substitute for worship as it loses the very relationships that Christians desire. Kent and Henderson (2017) established a strong connection between having friends in a congregation and ongoing and regular worship participation. Kent and Henderson's findings are that congregational participation is often established through orientation and integration, whereby new members grow increasingly comfortable and build relationships with other members in the congregation. One of the benefits of Sunday church is just good old human contact and touch (Campbell, 2021). In contemporary culture, people are desperate for human contact (Baron & Pali, 2021).

Many never get a handshake, a pat on the back, or the hugs found through the communal relationships of in-person church attendance (Baron & Pali).

Volunteerism

Voluntary member participation is a hallmark of church vitality, as the more the laity is regularly involved in the church's life, the more likely a church will experience dramatic growth (Earls, 2016; Roozen, 2015; Thiessen et al., 2018). Because participating in the mission and activities of a church are voluntary, church vitality can be seen through its member's voluntary and enthusiastic involvement (Hungerman, 2020). Enthusiastic and committed involvement of members demonstrates spiritual vitality and catalysts for membership growth (Jo et al, 2021; Kent & Henderson 2017). That being said, the vitality of a church is visually demonstrated by mobilized congregants, which results in attracting members (Kent & Henderson). Voluntary involvement is most commonly measured by tithing, prayer, and worship attendance (Thiessen et al.). For a church to reach its missional goals and experience any semblance of growth, many members must be engaged (Kent & Henderson). Therefore, leaders should not shy from challenging members to participate, as people want to be called and committed to a worthy mission (Haskell et al., 2018). Empowering church members is key to church growth (Chang, 2021).

Outward Focus

Congregations experiencing vitality are outwardly focused, while conversely, inwardly focused churches do not experience vitality (Thiessen et al., 2018). An outward focus includes evangelism, neighborhood involvement, and even partnerships with other churches (Thiessen et al.). Growing congregations identify evangelism as the purpose of

their church, while those in declining churches cited their purpose being acts of social justice (Haskell et al., 2016a). Keita and Lao (2020) also found that church members agree that evangelism and follow-up are key to increasing church membership. Outward focus is directly aligned with the church's mission to evangelize the lost and equip the saved (Allen, 2020). When a church loves God and His mission, it will naturally love its neighbors (Snook, 2019). When evangelism is not emphasized in a church or sadly even intentionally de-emphasized, those churches often shrink (Haskell et al., 2018). A church is not meant to shrink; it is meant to grow, which happens as the unsaved are brought to salvation through the evangelism efforts of the church members (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021a). Missionally oriented congregations are especially committed to appealing to outsiders (Kent & Henderson 2017). Evangelism is the starting point of church growth (Marpaung, 2020).

Unity

Davis-Olds (2017) indicated that growing churches often exhibit unity, however, an exodus of church members is not something to be feared as a church is transforming to one that experiences vitality as this departure is often necessary to produce unity. It provides an opportunity for members who do not support the new direction and vision of the church to voluntarily disassociate themselves with the church, resulting in less division within the congregation and greater support for the changes being made, thereby making success more likely (Davis-Olds).

Inspirational Worship

Roizen (2015) provided a view that congregational vitality is significantly linked with worship that is inspiring to congregants. Natural Church Development, as

documented by both Cincala and Chase (2018), and Ferreira and Chipenyu (2021a) indicated inspiring worship services are what enables congregants to experience the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Inspirational worship has a way of drawing people to church all by itself (Ferreira & Chipenyu). The research by Powell et al. (2019) specifically connected contemporary worship to church growth. However, the research from Thumma (2021) indicates that compelling worship is not necessarily contemporary music but is relevant to the felt needs of the congregants.

Preaching

Preaching is deserving of a central role in developing and achieving church vitality (Snook, 2019). Preaching, when done properly, grows attendees into disciples who love and follow Jesus and understand their purpose in the church's mission of evangelism (Snook). Wulff (2011) noted that the sermon is one of the primary reasons a person joins a church, so it is likely a primary reason for the decline in church membership. Gallup (2021) found that the sermon is the most influential factor for choosing a church, specifically sermons that teach you more about scripture. Therefore, a huge burden for equipping and inspiring the church rests in the preaching (Snook). Not just any manner of preaching will suffice; the theology of the sermon matters greatly (Haskett et al., 2016b). Conservative doctrine, which emphasizes evangelism and is permeated with a theology of hope throughout the preaching, has been shown to lead churches into vitality (Haskett et al.; Wollschleger, 2018). Churches that place less of an emphasis on the Bible are in decline while conservative evangelical churches are growing (Dunaetz and Priddy, 2013; Earls, 2019; Earls, 2022; Mettler, 2021). Gaillardetz and Gaillardetz (2020) added that the sermon should communicate God's promises of love,

support, and encouragement for parishioners in their journey of Christ-like discipleship and calls to peacemaking and reconciliation, all of which have been previously documented in this literature review as necessary for church growth. Preaching the word of God with an honest style of communication and holding up the importance of scripture to challenge and disrupt will lead to church growth (Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz; Keita & Lao, 2020). If the church's mission is equipping the saints and evangelism of the lost, then the sermon should be the apex of the church (Allen, 2020). It should be noted that not all churches that preach correctly are growing (Dunaetz, 2014). Irawati (2021) advised that preaching that explains the Word of God so that the congregation can accept it easily will experience growth. Chang (2021) maintained that a growing church will have the right premise, which is to be faithful to biblical teaching. When a church maintains the integrity of the Word of God, its members are strengthened and less likely to fade away (Chang).

Conversions

Churches experiencing vitality will experience numerical growth in conversions (Jo et al., 2021). A church's success is indicated by its ability to lead people in its community to convert to Christianity (Davis et al., 2010). To avoid extinction, a church must be able to replenish its members through lost members rejoining, babies being born to members, and new converts (Jo et al.). A church's sustainability is directly tied to its ability to reproduce itself (Jo et al.).

Innovation

Central to what it means to experience congregational vitality is a church's attitude toward innovation (Thiessen et al., 2018; Thumma, 2021). The traditional ways

of gathering and worshipping do not work as effectively as they once did (Thumma). The tension lies in churches being notoriously resistant to change, yet growth and vitality are directly linked to innovation (Davis-Olds, 2017). The demands of the marketplace make it imperative for churches to innovate (Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020). Innovative churches and entrepreneurial pastors take risks and experiment with new ways of doing things (Thiessen et al.). Thiessen et al. further argued that the two greatest barriers to church innovation are limited human resources and limited financial resources. A church must not and cannot simply wait for people to come; the church must proactively and innovatively attract people (McMullin, 2013). Roozen (2015) noted that innovation in worship, which often leads to tension in a church, leads to church growth.

Davis-Olds (2017) conducted a single case study focused on one church that had turned from decline into thriving growth by embracing change rather than avoiding it. As this church embraced methods it had not previously imagined, a new missional identity was formed, and growth followed (Davis-Olds). Mills (2016) hypothesized that healthy churches would instinctively grow. Mills surmised that our innovative responsibility is to create an environment where God can bring about His harvest and grow His kingdom. Mills further outlined his personal experience implementing the Natural Church Development process over seven years in a church he led that had experienced a decline. That church returned to growth only after embracing change, which occurred after the church members collectively had a sense of urgency. Suppose churches see that Sunday is becoming less sacred and more secular through the offering of kid's sports, shopping options, and work. In that case, the evidence points that only a few declining

congregations are amending their programming to provide flexible schedules for worship or even other strategies to respond to these changes (McMullin, 2013).

Adaptive

A church could be said to be experiencing vitality if it could be identified as a learning organization (Davis-Olds, 2017) that is willing to change (Thumma, 2021). A learning organization, noted by Davis-Olds, adapts its ministry methods as culture changes all around them. Learning organizations are further characterized as having a sense of curiosity, being adaptable, and having systems that indicate their willingness to examine the world around them and respond in new ways of ministry (Davis-Olds). Churches that adapt to the changing culture brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will lead the charge for church growth and vitality in the future (Pakpahan, 2021; Cote, 2022). Clark (2016) explained that the future belongs to the learners. Cote's research posits that adaptive leadership is where leaders encourage others to learn new ways to address and solve problems. Jackson and Williams (2021) also affirm that we will not thrive in a new environment without learning new ways. Dreyer (2015) offered a warning, though, about adaptation, as he found that churches and denominations that adapted to a culture of consumerism and marketing may seem to be successful, but many have adapted to seek popularity and are thus declining in membership and are losing their identity and integrity (Dreyer).

Discipleship

Churches that experience vitality have pastors who are more frequently engaged in spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and Bible study, than pastors in declining churches (Haskell et al., 2016b). Churches experiencing vitality help people grow in their spiritual

life, as everyone in these churches is clear on how the discipleship process works (Thiessen et al., 2018). Budijanto (2020) studied churches in Indonesia and found when a church had more than 10% of its members engaged in discipleship, 67.5% of the churches experienced growth, while conversely, 60% of churches declined when little or no one was involved in discipleship. Churches that cannot grow their members cannot expect to grow by adding new members (Irawati, 2021). McIntosh (2021) referred to discipleship as the right process, a non-negotiable for church growth (Chang, 2021). As believers mature in their faith, they will be more likely to engage in The Great Commission of making more disciples (Chang).

Conservative Theology

Mettler (2021), Haskell et al. (2018), and Thiessen et al. (2018) showed that there is a particular theology that leads to church vitality. Mettler noted that the more liberal a church becomes, the quicker it dies. Research by Haskell et al. found conservative theological doctrine was a major distinguisher of growing mainline Protestant churches from those that are declining. Conservative theology places greater emphasis on the literal interpretation of scripture, the Bible as the authority and as a guide for life, the saving power of Christ, and evangelism (Haskell et al.). It should not be surprising that these churches grow as conservative Protestants who focus on evangelism (Thiessen et al.).

Programming

Four specific programs are consistent among churches experiencing vitality. First, programming offered for children and teenagers (Haskell et al., 2016a). Parents bring their children to church activities more than other religious groups (Jo et al., 2021).

Second, contemporary worship (Haskell et al.; Roozen, 2015). Third, starting brand new churches, commonly called church planting (Jo et al., 2021). Fourth, small groups where communal relationships are nurtured (Jo et al.). However, Irawati (2021) warned that churches that live by programming rather than seeking to reach the lost through evangelism will not grow.

Age

The age of members and clergy in growing churches tends to be younger (Haskell et al., 2016b). Congregations where the average age is younger tend to be more future-focused and excited about the future (Cincala & Saucedo, 2019). Practically speaking, older congregants tend to have less energy for volunteering and are less likely to contribute to congregational growth through childbearing (Haskell et al.). As has already been noted, many protestant millennials are leaving the church (Puffer, 2018). The older the church membership becomes, as has been noted concerning The Church of the Nazarene, the less likely it is to grow (Roozen, 2015). Both Thumma (2021) and Earls (2016) noted that churches whose membership is at least one third senior adults are less likely to grow. Additionally, the age of the pastor does impact the growth rate (Cincala & Saucedo). The older the pastor, the older the congregants (Thumma). Younger pastors, under 50, tend to implement the leadership styles most conducive to church growth; are team-oriented, goal-oriented, and relational (Cincala & Saucedo).

Pastoral Tenure

A pastoral tenure of five or more years has a high correlation with church vitality, while a pastoral tenure of fewer than five years almost always guarantees a lack of congregational vitality (Strunk et al., 2017). Davis et al. (2010) found that leader tenure

results in distinctive patterns of organizational behavior and has a direct impact on organizational performance. Fowler et al. (2019) identified that a constant change of leaders leads to instability in a church, and this attrition at the senior level has a trickle-down effect on church members.

Social Services

Hungerman (2020) found that church vitality is often expressed in providing social services and other benefits to their congregation and the broader community. Such services include food pantries, school adoption programs, and mentoring (Hungerman). Arthur (2021) also noted that the church has historically grown in numbers when caring for the poor and needy. However, this is not all good news, as Watkins (1993) found that when a church declines, it is often because fewer members come from the surrounding community. When members must drive to church from neighboring or distant communities, the church members will no longer relate to the immediate community around the church facility (Watkins). The result is that the congregation then seeks to somehow relate to their immediate neighborhood, becoming increasingly focused on social service programs rather than as communities where people worship and work together (Watkins). In essence, the church members could be sidetracked from their ultimate purpose of worshiping and glorifying God (Watkins).

The Supernatural

Overwhelmingly, when surveyed, church attendees offer many human-oriented explanations for church vitality, but the supernatural cannot be ignored (Haskell et al., 2018). On a similar note, Thiessen et al. (2018) presented that churches experiencing vitality have a supernatural component. While this component is hard to quantify, it is the

single greatest distinguisher of religious organizations from secular ones. One way to see this Christ-centric component in action is that these churches are obedient to what God has called them to be and do (Thiessen et al.). Both conservative Protestant churches and Catholic leaders point to a congregation's obedience in following the Holy Spirit as evidence of this supernatural component (Thiessen et al.). The church is completely dependent on God's actions, not on what people do (Dreyer, 2015). McIntosh (2021) refers to this as the right power and believes it to be necessary for church growth (Chang, 2021). All growth comes through the power of the Holy Spirit (McIntosh). Church leadership must rely on the Holy Spirit rather than human efforts for growth (Chang).

The literature review provided a robust profile of a growing church. It is through effective pastoral leadership that a church is enabled to experience this vibrancy thus avoiding decline (Arikan, 2020).

Leadership

A critical question in this research is about what factor could enable a church to avoid decline and experience vitality. Research studies showed that the answer is leadership, as it is critical for the success of any organization (Arikan, 2020; Northouse, 2019; Valldeneu et al., 2021). Leaders are saviors and heroes for organizations in crisis (Cote, 2017). The same holds true for churches as it has been shown that a lack of strong, competent leaders leads to the decline of church congregations (Wollschleger, 2018). Likewise, church vitality is dependent on leadership (Bazan, 2019; Patterson, 2019). Achieving success in a church requires a leader to understand the complex nature of leadership (Grandy, 2013).

A clear definition of leadership is hard to pin down as there are over 350 known definitions (Cote, 2017). Noticeably, the common denominator of those definitions is that leadership influences others to pursue a commonly held objective (Cote; Keita & Lao, 2020; Northouse, 2019; Rojas, 2018; Rudolph, 2020). A leader therefore is one who influences followers to achieve a common organizational goal (Cote).

For a church to experience vitality, an effective leadership style must be in place (Keita & Lao, 2020). The leadership style of a pastor is an important determinant of the organization's success (Arikan, 2020). Each specific stage of a church requires a certain leadership style (Rojas, 2018). Leaders must tap into various leadership styles to lead in our changing world (Mauri, 2017). However, this research is primarily concerned with the style that leads to vitality. Therefore, identifying the leadership style of a pastor is vital to realize the success and vitality of a church (Arikan: Keita & Lao; Rojas).

Full Range Leadership Theory

One of the most validated theories concerning effective leadership styles is the full range leadership theory (Valldeneu et al., 2021). First developed by Bass and Avilio (1999), this theory categorized leaders into three types: transformational, transactional, and laissez-fair. It further identified nine identifying factors (Valldeneu et al.). Combined, these three leadership styles form a continuum where transformational leaders are most effective and laissez-fair leaders are the most ineffective (Allen et al., 2013).

Figure 4

Leadership Continuum



Note: From Leadership in software development: Comparing perceptions of agile and traditional project managers. Proceedings of the 15th Americas Conference on Information Systems, 2009 (<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009/184>).

Transformational Leadership

Keita & Lao (2020) found transformational leadership to be the best style for leading a church to vitality. It is not surprising that this leadership approach may be the most popular and common in the current leadership culture (Arikan, 2020; Cote, 2017; Northouse, 2019). Transformational leadership was first explained by Burns (1978) and most prominently by Bass and Avilio (1990). A transformational leader is most often a charismatic and visionary leader who has a way of inspiring, energizing, and stimulating people to follow their vision and produce organizational or even societal change (Cote; Koufie & Muhammed, 2021; Northouse). Transformational leaders are often brought in to lead an organization through change (Northouse). Many great leaders are known for this leadership approach such as: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President John F. Kennedy (Hirtz et al., 2007), and Gandhi (Northouse). Typically, transformational leaders have great levels of charisma (Raffo & Williams, 2018), enabling the leader to influence followers. However, Raffo and Williams noted that not all transformational leaders have

great charisma, as in the case of Ken Chenault (CEO of American Express), Bill Gates, and Brenda Barnes (CEO of Sara Lee and Pepsi).

Both Grandy (2013) and Bass and Avolio (1999) share the four defining characteristics of transformational leaders: charisma, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational. Charisma means that a transformational leader will provide a clear vision that offers followers a sense of mission and pride and gives the leader great admiration and trust among followers. Individualized consideration is when a transformational leader listens to followers to gain an understanding of their concerns and treats them as individuals. Intellectual stimulation is when a transformational leader challenges assumptions and preconceived ideas by encouraging followers to think about old problems in new ways. Inspirational is when a transformational leader instills optimism among followers.

Transformational leaders convince followers to strive for great achievements (Hirtz et al., 2007). Both Cote (2017) and Northouse (2019) shared that the approach used allows leaders to inspire and empower followers to do great things and often achieves results well beyond the expected outcome. Transformational leaders inspire followers to change their motivations, expectations, and perceptions to achieve a common goal (Robinson, 2018). If a follower is unmotivated, the default is to work for their own self-interest. In this leadership method, followers are motivated to support the greater good or benefit the group rather than their self-interest (Northouse; Rowald, 2008). Leaders in this approach value their followers' creativity (Cote) and empower them to succeed (Northouse). In contrast to servant leadership, developing followers is not a primary purpose, but when it happens, it is a welcomed benefit (Wulff, 2011).

Many pastors as well as secular professionals are calling on the church to look to the business community for insight into how market-based solutions might enable their churches to add new members (Davis et al., 2010). Many business techniques such as marketing and budgeting have been found effective for a pastor as a church leader (Rojas, 2018). Churches would be wise to draw on successful for-profit organizations and leaders (Davis et al.).

Transformational leadership plays an integral role in church renewal (Løvaas et al., 2020). Keita and Lao (2020) found transformational leadership extremely motivating for church members. Transformational leadership has many connections to research regarding church vitality including providing followers with a sense of identity to the organization's vision (Rojas, 2018), and a positive association for both innovation (Løvaas et al.) and organizational outcomes (Valldeneu et al., 2021). Transformational leadership is especially important as it has already been noted that church vitality is linked with innovation (Løvaas et al.). Transformational leaders have a direct positive relationship with organizational change and organizational creativity (Allen, 2013).

Transformational leadership is not without criticism, including the potential for abuse of power and unhealthy leader-follower dependency (Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020). Additionally, pseudo transformational leadership is when leaders' transformation work is negatively experienced, as in the case of Adolph Hitler (Northouse, 2019).

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leaders are task-oriented (Cote, 2017). Their focus is on clarifying employees' roles and duties and reward or punish employees based on their performance (Cote). Transactional leaders clearly outline tasks, and followers agree to comply for

compensation, recognition, or awards (Rowald, 2008). A transactional leaders' primary focus is on supervision and organizational performance (Keita & Lao, 2020). Rojas (2018) calls this style the give-and-take approach that is driven mainly by rewards. The word implies an exchange (Arikan, 2020). Transactional leadership is an exchange between the follower and the leader, where the follower agrees to obey the leader in exchange for compensation (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). It does not involve deep levels of commitment (Arikan). Transactional leadership results in a minimalistic working relationship between followers and leaders (Amanchukwu). In comparison to transformational leadership, the transactional approach produces much weaker results in profit and follower satisfaction (Rowald, 2008). There are two factors by which a transactional leader is identified: contingent reward and active management by exception (Valldeneu et al., 2021). Contingent Reward is an interaction between the leader and the follower which promises rewards (Valldeneu et al.). Active Management by exception is when the leader monitors a follower's performance and takes corrective action as needed (Valldeneu et al.).

Laissez-faire

Laissez-faire leadership reflects an obvious absence of leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1990; Northouse, 2019). Laissez-Faire means *let them do* in French (Arikan, 2020). In other words, this type of leadership is a hands-off approach (Northouse). Laissez-faire leaders avoid responsibility, decision-making, and feedback to followers (Keita & Lao, 2020; Northouse). There is no attempt to help followers grow (Northouse) as they provide little to no direction at all to their followers (Rojas, 2018). An avoidance of decision making is a dominant characteristic of Laissez-faire leaders (Amanchukwu et

al., 2015). Laissez-faire leadership can be helpful in that team members have so much autonomy that they experience high job satisfaction (Amanchukwu et al.), but more often, the opposite is true in that laissez-faire leaders have a negative relationship to organizational change and organizational creativity (Allen, 2013; Valldeneu et al., 2021). There are two factors by which a transactional leader is identified (Valldeneu et al.). *Passive management by exception* is when the leader only intervenes when mistakes are made or standards are unmet, and *passive avoidance* is when the leader avoids involvement (Valldeneu et al.).

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is an altruistic and even paradoxical approach compared to other leadership styles (Northouse, 2019; Wulff, 2011). The distinctive and unique characteristic of this leadership style is that the leader's approach is to put the development and concerns of their followers first (Harefa, 2021; Northouse; Wulff). Grandy (2013) indicated that servant leaders are first servants, and then they are leaders. Often called a servant-leader, the person who takes on this approach embraces the servant aspect of that title as their foremost concern (Greenleaf, 1970). In servant leadership, the leader, in essence, becomes both a follower and a leader (Keita & Lao, 2020). The primary function of a servant leader is to serve the needs of the followers (Rojas, 2018; Wulff). Most leadership styles emphasize a leader's responsibility in getting followers to serve the organization, yet this model gets the leader to serve the followers (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011). Many attributes describe a servant-leader such as authentic, developer of people, other-oriented, humble, convincing, self-confident, having a deep

sense of purpose, risk-takers, creating a culture of a common vision, and having the ability to think strategically to achieve that mission (Grandy).

Servant leadership was pioneered by Greenleaf (1970), who indicated that he was inspired by the book *Journey East* by Herman Hesse (Wulff, 2015; Cincala & Chase, 2018). Greenleaf taught that to be a servant leader was to naturally first serve and then consciously aspire to lead (Cincala & Chase; Wulff), a sharp contrast to those who are leaders first. Some of the defining characteristics of a servant leader are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Wulff).

When implemented and embraced by followers, the servant leadership approach produces remarkable results: follower growth, organizational performance, and societal impact (Northouse, 2019). Savage-Austin and Honeycutt (2011) found that servant leadership creates a culture that allows followers to flourish, increases productivity, and reduces employee turnover. Servant leadership is the only approach that argues for shared control and influence with followers (Northouse). Leaders who embrace this approach have high emotional intelligence, are empathetic, and nurturing (Northouse). Greenleaf (1970) believed that the best test to see if servant leadership is working or if a leader is in fact a servant-leader is if the followers are growing, becoming healthier, wiser, and more likely to be servants themselves, and there will be an effect on the least privileged in society.

It must be noted that while servant leadership is very common for churches, some have found it to work (Keita & Lao, 2020) while others have found that it does not work (Savage-Austin & Honeycutt, 2011). Several well-known companies like Chic-fil-A,

Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Toro, Herman Miller, and Men's Warehouse have transitioned to this style to gain a competitive advantage (Savage & Honeycutt; Shirin, 2015). Many of these companies have transitioned because they deliver profits and create an enjoyable workplace (Wulff, 2015).

Transforming Servant Leadership (TSL)

TSL is a synthesis of the strengths of both the servant and transformational leadership styles (Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020). Transforming servant leadership is a relatively new approach that combines servant and transformational leadership principles (Stauffer & Maxwell). It focuses on the benefits followers derive from transformational leadership; it further involves the leader's influence, motivation, and organizational success (Stauffer & Maxwell). The selfless aspect of servant leadership has the potential to counter the criticism that transformational leadership can lead to dictatorial or even oppressive leadership (Stauffer & Maxwell). Grandy (2013) believed more research is needed to fully understand the relationship of servant and transformational leadership theories on nonprofit organizations, such as churches.

Pastoral Leadership

The biblical imagery for pastoral leadership is displayed via three roles: prophet, priest, and king (Blair et al., 2012). Jentile (2021) defined these three roles as to proclaim (the prophet), to care (the priest), and to lead (the king). The kingly/leadership role of the senior pastor of a local congregation is the primary focus of this current study. The pastor, as the means through whom God works to achieve His purpose with the church, is responsible for providing leadership that facilitates church growth (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b; Keita & Lao, 2020). The pastor is not just a preacher or a shepherd; he is also the

leader of an organization pursuing a mission (Snook, 2019). The pastor is divinely placed by God to lead (Palmer-Atkins, 2018) and bears responsibility for a congregation's overall conduct and performance (Davis et al., 2010). Pastoral leadership, therefore, is necessary for a congregation to experience vitality (Thiessen et al., 2018).

Leadership in the church is especially complex as both Grandy (2013) and Jentile (2021) noted. They stated for various reasons for the complexity, such as the volunteer nature of an organization, the volunteers' varied and sometimes altruistic motives, the need for a pastor to master fundraising, management of funds, follower motivation, sustaining tradition, and innovation (Grandy; Jentile). Competency in these areas among others, leads a church to growth just as a deficiency in pastoral leadership is often a key contributor to a lack of church vitality (Strunk et al., 2017).

Pastoral leadership is not just for preaching; it is for the development of a community (Strunk et al., 2017). Pastoral leadership is an essential ingredient for congregational vitality (Wollschleger, 2018) as that vitality does not occur automatically for any church but does so through strategic pastoral leadership (Thiessen et al., 2018). Church leaders who want to impact their congregation must be active in preaching, teaching, guiding, managing, and directing the church (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). Pastors and church leaders are responsible for membership growth, so they must design structures that facilitate growth (Keita & Lao, 2020). Churches represent unique organizational types in strategy, structure, processes, and desired outcomes (Davis et al., 2010). When a pastor is more competent, creative, and energetic, the greater the chance for the church to be mobilized for its mission and growth (Wollschleger). Leaders of the modern church growth movement have indicated that churches need to be managed well,

have a pursuit of organizational excellence, and regularly learn from the business sector (Davis et al.).

The problem of church decline may be more directly connected with orthopraxy (right practices) as opposed to orthodoxy (right thinking) and orthopathy (right motives) (Stevens, 2020). If not, the church would grow instead of declining, because congregations begin to decline without strong, competent leaders (Ibiyeomie, 2021, Wollschleger, 2018). There appears to be a general lack of valuing church growth among pastoral leaders (Davis-Olds, 2017; Irawati, 2021). Pastoral complacency, seen in such ways as poorly prepared sermons, disregard for people, a lack of developing a hospitable culture, and member alienation has led to a lack of church vibrancy (Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz, 2020).

Pastoral Leadership in Light of COVID-19

Pandemics have historically shaped the world with sweeping effects (Rudolph, 2021). It is no surprise that the coronavirus and its various mutations are changing everyday life (Cho, 2021; Mpofu, 2021; Simanjuntak, et al., 2021; Verster, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, which began on March 11, 2020 (Garba, 2021; Koufie & Muhammed, 2021), shows serious and immediately adaptive challenges for church leaders (Chen & Sriphon, 2021; Van Kemenade, 2021) and is also reshaping religious practices and activities (Garba; Mpofu; Zandroto, 2021). Many organizations have been forced to make significant operational changes considering COVID-19 (Seaton et al., 2021), and the church is no exception as the effects of COVID-19 may change how the church operates and how it is led (Baron & Pali, 2021; Pakpahan, et al., 2022). The COVID pandemic has intensified the ongoing crisis of worship decline that the church

has been experiencing for some time (Evensen, 2020). Jones (2021) stated the coronavirus pandemic is the most notable disruption in worship attendance in U.S. history. Pakpahan, et al. postulated that the church will not return to its worship patterns in place before the pandemic. With the present pandemic slowing, if not ending, studies should be conducted to understand more fully what will make an effective leader in light of COVID-19 (Rudolph, 2021).

MacDonald et al., (2020) claimed that the COVID pandemic is not the real crisis for the church - it was the crisis before the crisis. The church has always taken advantage of pandemics for growth, as they open new frontiers for ministry (Garba, 2021). Both Garba and Arthur (2021) shared that the church has come through various pandemics throughout history such as the Antoine plague of A.D. 154, the Justinian plague A.D. 541-542, the black death of 1346-1353, the Russian plague of 1770-1772, the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1893, the flu pandemic of 1889-1890, and the H1N1 swine flu of 2009-2010 among many others. The COVID-19 pandemic is not unprecedented (Arthur). Simanjuntak et al., (2021) also explained that even in pandemics that have engulfed the world, such as the bubonic plague and cholera, God has promised to work for the good in all things, therefore, the pandemic can become a blessing if the church responds with new and innovative leadership.

The church is a community of people who gather for worship, fellowship, and sharing (Cho, 2021). The church describes its function and mindset with words and phrases such as community, congregation (to gather), in-the-flesh (incarnation), fellowship (koinonia), and the body of Christ (Pakpahan, et al., 2022). The aforementioned phrases communicate the high value of the gathered community

(Pakpahan et al.). All of these have been altered by the effects of COVID-19 and will require leadership to navigate (Pakpahan et al.). In a post-COVID world, the church's mission will remain the same, but church leadership will be much different (Arthur, 2021). Attitudes towards church were changed (more likely, they were revealed), and these attitude changes will require leadership adaptation (Cho). It is essential first to understand the mindsets that may permeate our society to have a clear view of the leadership challenges for a post-COVID-19 church. The literature review has found six societal mindsets that may have lasting effects on the church.

People Will Fear Interaction

Cho (2021) and Meeker (2020) pointed out many societal examples of declining human interaction that have been accelerated greatly by the pandemic. Some of these examples include people choosing curbside pickup and home delivery of meals over in-person dining, choosing to order groceries online and delivery to your door rather than shopping in-person, doctors providing telehealth appointments over in-office appointments, increased spending on cloud services by chief executive officers for employees to work from home (Johnston, 2020). These examples purport a society that may have less person-to-person interaction and is keeping people close to home.

Disconnection may be especially felt in churches as older members, who largely support the church financially, do not return due to fear of interaction (Francis & Village 2021).

Digital Transformation is Accelerating

Cho (2021) and Meeker (2020) heavily covered the topic of digital transformation acceleration. According to Cho, digital transformation is integrating digital technology into all areas of an organization. The digital transformation has been a part of our society

for some time, but the pandemic has accelerated it and can be seen via virtual classrooms, ordering food through on-demand digital platforms like Doordash and Instacart, the exponential growth of zoom conferences from ten million to two hundred million daily meetings in the first three months of the pandemic in 2020 (Cho). Simanjuntak, et al, (2021) contend that the pandemic has ushered in what he calls *Society 5.0*, an era in which technology becomes a part of humans themselves such as the internet of things, artificial intelligence, and big data. It may be safe to assume life after COVID-19 might maintain some aspects of a non-face-to-face digital lifestyle (Cho). A virtually inclined society would undoubtedly make building a community difficult for a church, yet it may open new possibilities for sharing the gospel (Cho).

The church has always leveraged technology for communicating the gospel (Perky, 2022). The Apostle Paul embraced the use of pen and paper, a new technology in his time, to write his epistles (Pakpahan et al., 2022; Perky). Many technological uses of the church can be seen, including the use of the Roman road in the first century (Perky), the use of the Gutenberg printing press in the Reformation Era, and television in the mid-twentieth century and one could argue they should be leveraged today (Simanjuntak et al, 2021; Zandroto, 2021). Billy Graham leveraged evangelism through mass media such as radio and television (Pakpahan et al.; Wrench, 2021). Currently the church uses almost every digital medium, including e-mail, websites, internet forums, videos, and social networking sites (Pakpahan et al.). From the inception of the iPhone in 2007, the church has leveraged this technology to spread the gospel (Pakpahan et al.).

In a post-COVID world the church cannot discard the gains made or the skills developed during the pandemic but should leverage them to serve the members (Arthur,

2021). Mpofu (2020) reminded us that a move to virtual worship greatly affects how the church can minister to the poor. Reimer (2021) challenges the church to face the facts that the culture is determined by digitalization, therefore, we must find effective ways of communicating the gospel via the internet and social networks, or what is also referred to as a *digital cathedral* (Campbell, 2021).

Heightened Psychological Distress and Anxiety in General

The new reality of virtual services and the inability of meeting other believers in person could cause depression among congregants (Adegboyega et al., 2021; Rudolph, 2021). McFadden (2022) reports that depression and anxiety have been widely documented as being caused by COVID. Many church members' mental health issues, including depression and anxiety stem from an inability to reconcile the belief that God is love yet has still allowed the suffering brought on by COVID (Jenkins, 2021).

Increased Telecommuting

Working remotely has been a part of society but has been exponentially accelerated during COVID-19 (Meeker, 2020). Little difference has been shown between the productivity of telecommuters and standard in-person workers (Rudolph, 2021). More workers will work remotely or semi-remotely following COVID-19, and this trend may bleed into the church, leading some to consider tele-worshiping just as effective as in-person worship. As recently as June 2021, several leading companies such as Google, Apple, and Amazon have all indicated they will return to in-person work as their default approach (Birch, 2021). Yet others, such as Twitter, Slack, and Dropbox have called themselves remote-first organizations (Birch).

The Emergence of Digital Leadership

Digital leadership is also called e-leadership or virtual leadership and is disrupting nearly every industry (Cahyadi & Magda, 2021; Rudolph, 2021). As parishioners become accustomed to working electronically with leaders, they may develop electronic expectations for pastors.

Consumption of Entertainment

During the pandemic, the number of subscribers to digital entertainment such as Netflix, Hulu, and Disney+ has risen dramatically (Hasanbayli, 2021). Social media platforms also saw a 55% increase in postings during 2020 (Hasanbayli).

Given the above six societal mindsets, Widjaja et al., (2021) claimed that the church must consider the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for growth rather than a crisis as pandemics and epidemics have historically been motivational for church growth. Hayward (2018) also shared that epidemics have typically led the church to periods of rapid growth. Garba (2021) noted that pandemics have always affected the Christian church the most; nevertheless, such periods also help shape the Christian approach in expanding the Gospel.

Generational Responses

Pakpahan et al. (2022) highlighted that generations are responding differently to the emergence of a virtual ministry, making leadership in a virtual civilization very complicated. Millennials, for whom the internet is a vital part of life, readily embrace virtual ministry, whereas older generations of church members do not readily accept virtual ministry (Pakpahan, et al.).

Leadership Style

The specific leadership style of a pastor plays an important role in the growth of a church (Ham, 2012; Ali, 2021, Cincala & Chase, 2018) and will have direct implications on how they will lead the church. For the success of an organization, it is necessary to adopt an effective leadership approach (Stauffer & Maxwell, 2020; Valldeneu et al., 2021). Not all leadership styles are equally effective in leading a church to growth (Cincala & Chase). Wollschleger (2018) indicated that pastor leadership styles are an understudied factor for church growth. Kuofie and Muhammed (2021) discovered that 69.12% of their population surveyed contend strategic leadership will be the preferred leadership style in the aftermath of COVID-19 while only 4.41% of those surveyed expect an authoritarian leadership style will be practiced post-COVID-19.

The research seeking the ideal leadership style for a pastor, by Keita and Lao (2020), pointed to transformational leadership, in which a pastor positions himself at the forefront of change and develops infrastructure and leadership that will carry out the organizational vision. Carter (2009) led a study focused on determining if there was a difference in leadership styles between effective and ineffective pastors. The results of this study were that the transformational leadership style, rather than a transactional leadership style was a statistically significant predictor of the effectiveness of a senior pastor (Carter; Ibiyeomie, 2021). Cincala and Chase (2018) found that servant leadership, while a popular leadership style among pastors, produced a lower five-year growth rate than other leadership styles, but when combined with other styles produced the greatest growth rate. It was also discovered that pastors who claim to serve with a lone leadership style have a less developed concept of leadership than other pastors (Cincala & Chase).

The findings by Cincala and Chase suggest servant leadership alone is not the right style for a pastor who wants their church to grow. A 10-year study from 2008-2018 by Natural Church Development (Cincala & Chase) examined pastoral leadership styles and the impact of each style on their congregation. The study surveyed 10,590 congregations, and the results of the study suggested that authoritarian transformational leadership was the leadership style that resulted in the most growth (Cincala, 2020).

Rowold (2008) strongly suggested pastors adopt transformational leadership for three main reasons. First, transformational leadership has been validated in both for profit and not-for-profit organizations alike (Rowold). Second, transformational leadership has been found to be associated with the motivation and performance of followers (Rowold). Because churches require members to embrace the vision voluntarily and enthusiastically, transformational leadership meets this criterion. Third, transformational leadership has been proven to predict positive organizational outcomes (Rowald).

Pastoral Effectiveness

Churches grow when the leader does the right things (Ilarious, 2020). Church growth depends on the effectiveness of the pastor (Ibiyeomie, 2021). In a world caught in the grip of change, pastors bear a huge responsibility to provide skilled leadership (Venter & Hermans, 2020). Religious organizations invariably struggle to thrive under ineffective leadership (Fowler et al., 2019). Leadership principles that lead to church growth is where the research is lacking, as very few studies have been conducted to explore the role of pastoral leadership behaviors and what differentiates between effective and ineffective leadership practices (Carter 2009; Fowler et al.; Rowold, 2008). More emphasis has been given to pastoral leadership styles than ministerial leadership

effectiveness and identifying specific behaviors and skills (Butler & Herman, 1999). McKenna and Eckard (2009) also asserted that “researchers have not been able to identify one style or characteristic that appropriately represents overall pastoral leadership effectiveness” (p. 303). This research will seek to add to the literature in this area of pastoral leadership research. In exploring pastoral effectiveness, it is imperative to be careful to remember that what worked in one church might not be equally effective in every church, as they are in different settings and contexts while facing the common mission to reach their communities (Stetzer, 2006).

The few studies that were uncovered do offer several findings to be considered. Fowler (2018) found ineffective pastor leadership as a primary factor for loss in membership numbers. Fowler et al. (2019) found the following eight characteristics to define ineffective pastoral leadership: inconsistent behavior, lack of leadership courage, resistance to change, lack of stability, an autocratic leadership style, hypocrisy, behaving unethically, and being ethically neutral.

Zigan, et al., (2019) found 15 characteristics were consistently mentioned in discussing ideal church leadership. These characteristics are: authenticity, busyness, charisma, helping others to flourish, intelligence, managerial skills, open-mindedness, introvert/extrovert personality, relational skills, sensitivity, servant, spiritual mindedness, strength, team mindedness, and trustworthy.

Cavins (2018) sought to find effective leadership principles as communicated from Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6. In his research Cavins discovered that effective pastor leaders have such principles as a virtuous character, a spiritual response to material issues, a moderate approach, a willingness to observe social norms, an ability to teach

sound doctrine, and a love for God and people. Butler and Herman (1999) sought to uncover what would be considered an effective pastor. While this research is rather dated, it is included because it is the only research uncovered that specifically addresses pastor leadership in The Church of the Nazarene denomination. Butler and Herman found several distinctions among effective pastors in The Church of the Nazarene including; they are younger but more experienced than their peers, they lead larger congregations, they often have a seminary degree, and they are better problem solvers, planners, delegators, multi-taskers, and inspirers. Lastly, pointing towards transformational leadership, they found the most effective pastors were deemed as change agents who possessed greater developed leadership and management skills.

Summary

Chapter II explored the literature surrounding church growth and decline, church metrics, church vitality and the need for effective pastoral leadership practices. The studies uncovered offer insights and assertions, but the research is not plentiful. More can be done to create a more robust picture of the effective church leadership needed to address church decline in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States. As diminished performance and diminished talent of a senior pastor often result in church attendance decline (Fowler, 2018), effective leadership practices are critical to discover and add to the body of literature on effective pastoral leadership principles.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The problem this research was centered around is the lack of clarity surrounding the pastoral leadership principles and practices needed to address worship decline, specifically in The Church of the Nazarene denomination within the United States. The preceding literature review outlined the research-based insights on the relationship between church growth and the pastoral leadership principles needed to address the problem of church decline.

The plan for this qualitative collective case study was to identify the leadership commonalities among 12 senior pastors in churches that are experiencing numerical growth for in-person worship in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States. Chapter III presents and reviews the research methodology and relevant topics for this study. The research design provides an overview of methods and procedures. The participants section describes the physical makeup of participants. The data collection section outlines the procedures and methods that were used to collect data. The analytical methods section identifies the procedures that were used to analyze the data.

Research Questions

Three research questions were answered in this study.

1. What is the common leadership style(s) among 12 senior pastors in the church of the Nazarene whose churches are experiencing growth?

2. What are the common leadership practices among the senior pastors that have been effective in driving the growth of their churches?
3. What common leadership practices do the senior pastors believe will emerge as vital for church growth post-COVID?

Research Design

To explore the leadership commonalities among the 12 senior pastors, a qualitative research method was employed. A qualitative approach is one that the researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon from the participant's lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The specific phenomenon explored in this current research was the pastoral leadership practices and their impact on church growth among 12 senior pastors of growing churches in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States.

Qualitative research is artistic and requires an approach that is imaginative, focusing on the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of the information (Houghton et al., 2013). To gain a deep understanding of the phenomenon, this approach required data to be collected through means such as open-ended interviews, observations, documents, archives, and field notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, this methodology allows for an inductive approach. The principles sought after in this research will be uncovered through interactions between the researcher and the participants allowing the researcher to explore the lived experiences of the participants rather than obtaining theoretical explanations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative studies fill a role in contributing to the knowledge of social, individual, group, organizational, political, and related phenomena (Yin, 2012).

A collective case study approach of twelve senior pastors' leadership experiences in growing churches and how their leadership behavior influenced that growth was the research method for this study. This research followed the six steps of the case study method as outlined by Yin (2012): planning, design, preparation, collecting data, analyzing data, and reporting. A case study is a qualitative in-depth examination of a real-life situation through the collection of multiple sources of data rather than a statistical survey (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A collective case study uses multiple cases and then describes and compares them in order to provide insight into an issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Both Yin (2012) and Schooch (2020) indicated that qualitative case studies are the best choice when researchers are asking *how* or *why* questions, have little control over events, or aim to focus on contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. The decision to utilize the collective case study method was due to the opportunity to draw a single set of conclusions from multiple sources (Yin, 2012). Furthermore, collective case studies allow the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the explorative subject and evidence generated from a collective case study is strong and reliable (Yin). In addition, the writer can clarify if the findings from the results are valuable or not (Yin). Harrison et al. (2017) shared that the case study is the most suitable for holistic, in-depth, comprehensive investigation of a complex issue.

A collective case study was chosen due to the many strengths associated with such a design. A collective case study allows the research to focus on the confines of one specific phenomena of interest in multiple real-life settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crowe et al., 2011). Yin (2012) indicated that the ability to examine a case in a real-

world setting is what makes a case study distinct. A collective case study is particularly valid when human behavior, such as pastoral leadership, is central to the topic of interest (Harrison et al., 2017). This current research will focus on the senior pastors at several local churches, therefore, the case study approach fits well. The phenomenon to be studied in this research is church growth as it is directly related to pastoral leadership practices in this case.

Generalization is considered stronger in a collective case study approach than with a single case study approach (Mirriam, 2009), as it allows the researcher to compare patterns across cases (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). Yin (2009) suggested that collective cases increase generalizability. In a collective case study, the researcher is able to analyze data within each situation and across different situations. The writer studies multiple cases to understand the similarities and differences between the cases and therefore can provide the literature with important influences from its differences and similarities. A single case study is difficult to generalize the findings in other instances because each case will have different contexts (Adams & Lawrence). While the assumptions offered in a single case study will generally be true, the fact remains that some contexts are so different that they may not adhere to the assumptions offered. That is to say, the findings of each case will not ring true for all other cases. The findings of a case study can be so persuasive that they can lead the reader to weigh the results heavier than that of other studies (Adams & Lawrence). In this current study, conducting multiple case studies will remedy that situation. Schooch (2020) referred to this as transferability, which means to allow others to apply the principles and lessons learned in the cases studied to other situations. Both Creswell and Poth (2018) and Crowe et al. (2011) added that the reason

for choosing the collective case study approach is that it offers the advantage of comparisons to be made from the various cases and the possibility of replication. Case studies are conducive to qualitative research designs within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm by allowing for interaction between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Poth).

The concluding assumptions are also a hallmark strength of a collective case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Assumptions are the findings and/or lessons discovered in the study (Creswell & Poth). The findings of a case study may be applied with a degree of certainty that can be generally applied to all circumstances (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). Leadership can be very complex to quantify, therefore, the case study approach offers the best means to understand the phenomenon in question.

A collective case study approach allows for and includes different perspectives from multiple sources to be shown on a single issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Understanding church growth from a variety of pastors will certainly give the research more depth, and according to Creswell and Poth, understanding church growth from multiple perspectives added validity. Creswell and Poth claimed that this allows for the possibility to make conclusions that might otherwise be inaccessible. As to the question of how many cases are appropriate, Creswell and Poth shared that most researchers choose between four and five cases in order to gain generalizability. Collective case studies are more likely to be stronger and more compelling than single case studies and therefore regarded as being more robust (Yen, 2012). This research studied the lived experiences of 12 pastoral leaders. Understanding church growth from a variety of pastors and sources of evidence enabled the research to understand church

growth from multiple perspectives and added validity and created a more convincing theory (Creswell & Poth).

The strength of the collective case study approach lies in the fact that the researcher can study the phenomenon from real-life instances or an individual or community and from multiple data sources such as interviews, observations, and any pertinent documents, which will result in a rich and holistic account of the problem being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). Crowe et al. (2011) said case studies are used to explain a phenomenon within the natural setting that it occurs, therefore, some call this approach a naturalistic design in contrast to an experimental design. Both Crowe et. al. and Harrison et al. (2017) stated that the case study approach is the best approach for understanding a multi-faceted and complex issue in a real-life context. Studying these issues in a natural setting is appropriate for understanding a complex issue and making it relatable to others (Creswell & Poth). The case study methodology allows for an inductive approach whereby the principles sought after in this research will be explored through interactions between the researcher and the lived experiences of the participants rather than obtaining theoretical explanations (Creswell & Poth). The benefit of using a qualitative collective case study for this research was that it provides opportunities to arrive at reasonable conclusions about a phenomenon in its natural context, particularly when the boundaries between the context and phenomenon are unclear (Houghton et al., 2013). In keeping with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the participants *lived experience* is examined rather than the researcher's hypothesis (Adams & Lawrence, 2019). For all the reasons listed above, a qualitative methodology utilizing a collective

case study design as being the most appropriate for understanding the complex phenomenon of leadership that leads to church growth.

Participants and Setting

The participants for this study were 12 senior pastors of growing churches in The Church of the Nazarene denomination in the United States. Both Schooch (2020) and Creswell and Poth (2018) shared that most researchers choose between four and five cases, however choosing more may increase generalizability. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling, as this method has been proven effective in collective case studies (Schooch). Purposeful sampling is choosing a participant who meets a certain set of criteria (Creswell & Poth) and helps one to focus in-depth on a phenomenon, whereas probability sampling that is found in quantitative research does not take into account if the participants meet a certain criterion (Schooch).

Participant Criteria

The following criteria was used for choosing the participants:

- The participant must be a current senior pastor of a church in The Church of the Nazarene denomination.
- The participant must be ministering in the United States.
- The participant must be in a church that has experienced a minimum of 5% overall increase in worship attendance for the past three years.
- The participants' church must be larger than 250 in worship attendance.
- The participant must have been the senior pastor of the church for the entire three years.

Participant Selection

A list of participants was narrowed in consultation with Dr. Rich Houseal, the director of research services at The Church of the Nazarene denominational headquarters. Because The Church of the Nazarene has suspended reporting attendance for in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic the participants were somewhat hard to find through the research department alone. Therefore, snowball sampling was also implemented. Snowball sampling is when cases are identified from individuals who personally know participants who fit the criteria and whose cases are information rich (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Adams and Lawrence (2019) indicated that snowball sampling is used to find members of a population who may be difficult to find, therefore, the researcher identifies one member of the population, and that person helps to recruit other participants.

It was important to consider any risks to the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study there was no known physical harm to the participants. The participants should expect to experience minimal risk and/or discomfort during the interview.

Procedures

This qualitative study was conducted using a collective case study research design. Data was collected through semi-structured open-ended interviews, observations, and relevant documents. The study population included 12 senior pastors who were currently serving in growing churches in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States that have experienced numerical attendance growth for the past three years. The participants were narrowed through purposeful sampling with the help of the research department of the denomination and snowball sampling. Once participants were identified, emails were sent to each participant to introduce the purpose of the study,

inform participants of potential risks, share benefits of the study, and recruit them to participate. The current study window was held from April 1, 2022 through October 7, 2022. Once informed consent was obtained, the participants were scheduled for a one-hour virtual interview. While the topic was told to the participants ahead of time, the questions from the interview protocol were not provided so that the responses would be more spontaneous and authentic. During the interview, the participants were asked 12 predetermined interview questions and follow up questions, all of which were designed to answer the three research questions. A full and complete case analysis was conducted for each participant. Next, a cross case analysis was conducted among all the cases for the purpose of developing categories and themes. Last, findings were written using thick, rich descriptions.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher served as the human instrument in this study. It is wise to be honest and transparent about any relationships with the participants and potential biases that have potential to cloud the findings. Having been in The Church of the Nazarene denomination for my entire life I have made many acquaintances and friends with other clergy. I have personal acquaintances with two of the participants in this study. The other ten were previously unknown by me. There were two biases for me to consider and address. First, I had a long list of leadership principles that I believe are necessary to lead a church to growth. This comes from a lengthy and successful career of growing four churches. Understanding that others have experienced the same phenomenon from different experiences helped me to answer the research problem rather than confirm my own ideas. Second, I had many personal beliefs about the type of leader it takes to lead a

church to growth. If biases are left unchecked, the researcher may find themselves accidentally leading the participants towards specific conclusions. Ngozwana (2018) indicates that reflexivity is important to handling these persona beliefs when he writes that “reflexivity is a way of ensuring that the researcher does not influence the study through the strong held perceptions, feelings and experiences” (p. 24). This transparency offers a built-in accountability system for the researcher.

Data Collection

The purpose for data collection is to gather the information needed to examine a specific phenomenon. Collective case studies require multiple sources of data as they increase validity and reliability and allow for triangulation (Harrison et al., 2017; Schooch, 2020). The multiple sources of data collected in this current study consisted of open-ended interviews, observations, and relevant documents. All data collected is stored on the researcher’s computer until the completion of the doctoral degree and then will be deleted. The data is also securely stored by Olivet Nazarene University for a minimum of three years.

Data Collection

The following data collection was approved by the Institutional Review Board. The data collection method was an open-ended interview with each of the participants. Each interview was conducted virtually and recorded through Microsoft teams. The interviews consisted of eleven pre-arranged questions, and several follow up questions. During each interview field notes were also taken, giving special attention to potential In-Vivo codes and key phrases.

Data Preparation

Each interview was transcribed by Descript.com on the same day that the data was collected. The transcript of each recording was saved in a Microsoft Word file.

The Documents

The collected documents were gathered directly from the archives of the church. They included church bulletins, vision descriptions, and annual reports. Also, the annual statistical report was acquired through the denominations research website (www.nazareneresearch.org). The collected documents served as a backdrop for each case. No permissions were needed as these reports are made public by the denomination. All documents are electronically stored on the researcher's computer and will be deleted after the case study is completed. The data is also securely stored by Olivet Nazarene University for a minimum of three years.

Observations

Observations also took place. The researcher observed online sermons of the participants that gave insight into their leadership. Additionally, the researcher viewed each of the church's websites, the church's social media accounts, and each pastor's social media accounts to glean insights.

The Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured open-ended interview. Interviews are the primary means to mine for information as they are especially helpful in providing explanations for a phenomenon (Yin, 2012). The interviews were conducted virtually and recorded through the web conferencing tool on Microsoft teams, which provided a video recording of the interview. During the interviews, field notes were taken

with special emphasis to uncover potential in vivo codes. In vivo coding is where the actual words of the participant are used in the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Following the interview, an analytic memo was written to engage in deeper reflection. A transcript was prepared following each interview using [descript.com](https://www.descript.com). Recordings are stored on the researcher's computer for the duration of this program and will then be deleted. The field notes were taken in the researcher's analytic memo notebook and remain under the care of the researcher. The participant's privacy has been kept in two ways; first, the name of the participant was used in the findings, as a pseudonym has been used instead, and second, the researcher did not use any descriptive language that would allow anyone to determine which church was a setting of the case study.

Yin (2012) suggests that prearranged interview questions serve as a guide for the interview. The following interview questions were used as that guide.

1. Tell me briefly about yourself and your history as a pastor.

The purpose of this question was to gain insight into the background of the participant. Information gleaned from this question is used in the description of the participant in chapter IV.

2. How would you describe your leadership style?

Leadership style plays a pivotal role in the growth of a church (Ali, 2021; Cincala & Chase, 2018; Ham, 2012). As noted by Wollschleger (2018) pastor leadership styles are an understudied factor for church growth. This question examined if the participants have a common leadership style and led to the findings for research question one.

3. What would you say are your top leadership strengths?

The literature review highlighted that churches grow when a leader does the right things (Ilarious, 2020). Church growth depends on the skilled leadership of a pastor (Ibiyeomie, 2021; Venter & Hermans, 2020). This question was designed to address the gap in the literature pointed out by researchers such as Carter (2009), Fowler et al. (2019) and Rowold (2008) that little research has been done to explore the role of pastoral leadership behaviors and what differentiates between effective and ineffective leadership practices. Research question two is heavily dependent on this data.

4. Tell me about the growth you have experienced at your church.

The literature review shared that while many churches are declining there are some that are growing (Davis-Olds, 2017; Earls, 2022; Fowler et al., 2019; McMullin, 2013). This question was designed to verify that the participant's church is growing and to understand their lived experience with that phenomenon.

5. What are the metrics you use to measure growth?

The literature review showed multiple studies that offered varying definitions for quantifying church growth (Demesi et al., 2022, Nainggolan, 2020; Percy, 2020; Wagner, 1998). This question was designed to understand how the participants measure church growth.

6. Was there a season, an event, or a time that was the turning point in your church in which you began to experience growth? Please explain.

The literature review highlighted that catalytic events have historically driven Americas to worship (Schnabel & Bock, 2018; Hayward, 2018; Keita & Lao, 2019; Uecker, 2008). This question was designed to explore the catalysts that may have contributed to the growth of each participant's church.

7. What do you believe are the most effective pastoral practices that lead to church growth?

This question was intentionally designed to revisit the topic in question three. While question three was more personal in nature, this question is more general in nature.

8. Was there a time in which your church began to decline? If so, what did you do to address the decline?

The literature review extensively covered the fact that worship attendance in America is on the decline (Burge, 2020; Fowler et al., 2019; Franck & Iannaccone, 2014; Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz, 2020). This question was designed to illicit each participant's feelings towards decline and specific answers to addressing decline.

9. What are your most successful strategies and practices for the church that have proven to create attendance and membership growth?

Ineffective pastoral leadership has a direct link to loss in membership (Fowler, 2018). Several studies have outlined effective pastoral leadership characteristics (Butler & Herman, 1999; Cavins, 2018; Zigan, et al., 2019). This question was designed to compare the participants' practices with those of the literature review as well as to explore the commonalities among the participants thus driving the finding for research question two.

10. What, in your opinion, has changed in the church due to the COVID pandemic?

Prompt: Would you say these changes are permanent or temporary?

This question was designed to uncover the findings for research question three. The COVID-19 pandemic is known to have had a massive impact, in general, on churches

(Adamy, 2021; Barna, 2020b). This question was designed to understand the specific impact the pandemic had on each of the participants' churches.

11. What do you think will drive church growth following the COVID pandemic?

The literature review revealed that a new leadership paradigm has been needed in the days leading up to the pandemic (Bolsinger & Penno, 2017; Burch & Baumgartner, 2019; Ham, 2012; Stetzer, 2006), and in the days following COVID (Jackson & Jessica, 2020). Church leaders must learn to lead in new ways (Chen & Sriphon, 2021). This question was designed to understand each participant's insights to leading in a new era.

12. Is there anything about leadership in a growing church that you would like to tell me, even though I have not asked about it?

This question was designed to give the participants an opportunity to revisit any of the previous questions or to simply share any other insights they have to offer.

Interview protocol

An interview protocol adds to the validity and reliability of a study as it provides consistency for the interviews (Schooch, 2020). The following interview protocol was used when interviewing each participant.

1. The interviewee was first welcomed with the following statement: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. My name is David Thornhill, and I will be conducting the interview. To begin with, is it okay to both video and audio record this conversation? (allow for answer). The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the leadership commonalities of several senior pastors in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States that have had a direct effect on church growth. I would like to ask you several questions about your experience in this area. This will take about 60

minutes. As we begin, I would like to say this interview is intended to gather information on leadership, so I would like to encourage you to have a candid and honest discussion with me. This interview will be recorded and transcribed. Your identity will be protected by not using your name, the name of your church, the city in which you reside, or the city or district in which your church exists. You are also reminded that you can choose not to participate at any time during the interview. I will assume that the comments you share today are on-the-record and that you agree to being quoted unless you indicate otherwise. If you wish to say anything off-the-record, just let me know, and I will treat that information confidentially. Following my study all recordings of this conversation will be destroyed. Do you agree to all of this?

2. Review the consent form and allow participant to ask any questions of concern or clarification.
3. Inform the participant that all interview questions are open-ended and may require clarifying or follow-up questions to be asked by the interviewer.
4. The interviewer will then ask the participant if there are any further questions prior to beginning the interview.
5. The interviewer will then inform the participant that the recorder is being turned on.
6. The research questions outlined in Chapter III will be addressed through the interview.
7. Following the last interview question, the researcher will thank the interviewee for his or her participation and announce that the recorder will now be turned off.

Data Analysis

Proper data analysis is paramount for having a powerful and credible study (Roberts, 2010). The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which advocates for a hermeneutical approach to finding answers (Ponterotto, 2005), drove this research. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm means that meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection (Saldaña, 2016). As for the thematic analysis of this research study, an inductive approach was used to analyze the interview, the documents, and the observations. Also employed was both a within-case analysis and a cross-case analysis for the development of themes, suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) as being typical for multiple cases.

First, a within-case analysis was employed. A within-case analysis is used when multiple cases are being examined and provides a detailed description of each case and themes within that particular case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A within-case analysis consists of three steps: coding, development of categories, and the emergence of themes. Initial coding was used to analyze the documents and the interview. Initial coding is an open-ended approach that allows for multiple coding methods to be employed as well as first impression phrases (Saldaña, 2016). The codes were then organized into categories.

Next, a cross-case analysis was conducted. A cross-case analysis is a typical format in a collective case design (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Yin, 2012). A cross-case analysis provides a thematic analysis across all the cases to discover commonalities and differences among the cases as well interpretations of their meanings that leads to assertions and generalizations (Creswell & Poth). Identification of themes is key to

understanding the data (Creswell & Poth). Finally, through deep reflection, several themes emerged (Saldaña, 2016) and were written with thick, rich descriptions.

Ethical Considerations

Validity and credibility are important to ensure that research is as correct and accurate as possible. Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of a study while validity refers to the extent to which a study accurately evaluates the idea being investigated (Noble & Heale 2019). Research is considered to be of good quality if it has credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (Abdul & Alharthi, 2016). All four are represented in this study.

Three procedures were employed to ensure validity and credibility. First, the researcher engaged in reflexivity to disclose all biases. Clancy (2013) suggests reflexivity as crucial to producing research that is not dominated by personal prejudice or bias. Second, the use of thick, rich descriptions were used in the findings section of this paper to ensure validity. Securing these rich descriptions are a hallmark of case study research (Harrison et al., 2017). Rich and detailed descriptions put the issue of credibility in the hands of the reader enabling the reader to determine if the findings are transferrable to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, triangulation was employed (Roberts, 2010). Triangulation enriches research by employing multiple datasets to explain a phenomenon thus increasing the credibility and validity of research findings (Noble & Heale 2019).

Two procedures were put into place to protect the collected data. First, the electronic data collected was stored on the researcher's computer, which is password

protected. Second, the participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality.

Summary

Chapter III shared the master plan of this qualitative collective case study including the research questions, selection of participants, collection, and analysis of the data. With complete transparency this section has outlined the procedures, biases, challenges, methods, and processes in detail to create a study that is robust, deep, powerful, reliable, and valid. Chapter IV will share the findings of the data.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case research study was to provide insight into the leadership commonalities of 12 senior pastors from The Church of the Nazarene denomination in the United States that had a direct impact on the growth of their church. Chapter IV will share an overview of the participants, the data collection process, and the results of the coded interviews. Coding is a key element to this multiple research case study, as it allows the researcher to capture and interpret thoughts expressed by the participants that are similar and/or distinct, based on the researcher. Next, this chapter will reveal the findings related to the three research questions as they relate to the results from the interview of the participants.

Research Questions

Chapter IV contains the themes that emerged from the qualitative data to answer the three research questions derived for this study. Those research questions are as follows:

1. What is the common leadership style(s) among twelve senior pastors in the church of the Nazarene whose churches are experiencing growth?
2. What are the common leadership principles and practices among the senior pastors that have been effective in driving the growth of their churches?

3. What common leadership principles and practices do the senior pastors believe will emerge as vital for church growth post-COVID?

Participants

An in-depth exploration of the leadership practices was conducted with twelve senior pastors in The Church of the Nazarene from eight different states within the United States. Confidentiality has been ensured by assigning each participating pastoral leader the following aliases: P1 through P12.

Participant one

P1 is a 55-year-old Caucasian male who has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene since 1988. He has served as the pastor of his present church for 17 years during which time the church has grown from 305 to 813.

Participant two

P2 is a 45-year-old Caucasian male who has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene since the early 2000's. He has been at his present church since 2008 in which time the church has grown from 1370 to 1864.

Participant three

P3 is a Caucasian male in his mid 40's and has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene for 20 years. He has been at his church since 2006 in which time the church has grown from 1016 to 1333.

Participant four

P4 is a 37-year-old Caucasian male who has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene for 13 years. He has been at his church since 2017 in which the church has grown from 811 to 1347.

Participant five

P5 is a 47-year-old Caucasian male who has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene since 1998. He has been at his present church since 2017 which has grown from 1304 to 1391.

Participant six

P6 is a 50-year-old Caucasian male and has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene since 1994. He just began his 10th year at his present church which has grown from 542 to 1022.

Participant seven

P7 is a 69-year-old Caucasian male who has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene for 47 years. P7 has been at his present church since 2001. During that time the church has grown from 541 to 835.

Participant eight

P8, a Caucasian male in his late forties, has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene for 25 years. P8 has been at his current church for 5 years in which time the church has grown from 465 to 764.

Participant nine

P9 is a 67-year-old Caucasian male who has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene since the late eighties. P9 has been the senior pastor at the same church since 1995 during which the church has grown from 217 in worship to 1,796.

Participant 10

P10 is a Caucasian male who is 57-year-old and has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene since 1990. P10 has been at his present church since 2007 in which time the church has grown from 956 to 1503.

Participant 11

P11 is a 60-year-old Caucasian male who been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene for over 30 years. P11 has been at his present church for 22 years in which time it has grown from 392 to 2590.

Participant 12

P12 is a Caucasian male in his late 30's and has been in full time ministry in The Church of the Nazarene for 17 years. He has been the senior pastor at his current church for 4 years in which time the church has grown from 1049 to 1200.

Results

1. What is the common leadership style(s) among twelve senior pastors in the church of the Nazarene whose churches are experiencing growth?

Research question one is centered around the unique leadership style of each participant to determine if there was a commonality. The shared experiences of the twelve participants revealed an overwhelmingly common leadership style as all 12 identified the same leadership style making this result the most unexpected result of the entire data collection process. The theme will now be elaborated.

Collaborative/Team/Relational Leadership

The shared lived experience of the 12 of the pastors indicated that a collaborative/team leadership approach to church growth. While the participants see

themselves as integral in the creation and sharing of the vision, they collaborate with staff and lay leaders for the creation of the vision. This finding substantiates the finding from Kuofie (2022) that autocratic leadership may be a thing of the past. Both P5 and P8 had an identical way of sharing this thought as they both said they didn't see themselves as a "Moses type of leader" who goes up to the mountain to meet with God and then tells the church where they are headed, rather as P5 stated it, "my job is to figure out what is God calling the people of the church to do so long after I am gone they'll continue to carry out his mission and vision for them." P8 supported that concept when he clarified the role of a senior pastor as being "to determine what God's putting on the hearts of the people." P3 spoke to the issue by saying "I love collaboration. If it's just me coming up with all the ideas, then we're in a world of hurt." P4, in speaking of activating people to achieve a mission said, "they're not gonna be able to buy in until they've been allowed to pitch in." The participants heavily rely on the leadership team for the development of their vision. P10 said it clearly, "the team determines where you are gonna go." P6 added to this sentiment by saying "my job is to cast a vision. I don't necessarily have to create it." P5 said "sometimes leadership has come through our staff." A good example of a staff member providing vision came when P5 was asked if there was a catalytic event that propelled his church to growth. He indicated that one such event happened when a staff member returned from a sabbatical in which they shared their vision to revamp worship to being presence-driven.

2. What are the common leadership principles and practices among the senior pastors that they believe have been effective in driving the growth of their churches?

Research question two focused on the practices that were common among the 12 pastors. After conducting a cross-case analysis eleven themes emerged as commonalities. Those themes are explored in the following section.

Visionary Leadership

Providing visionary leadership was cited among all 12 participants as an essential pastoral leadership practice to grow a church. The participants, keeping in line with collaborative leadership, welcome others in creating the vision, but maintain that the senior pastor must provide direction and clarity for the overall vision, and must be astute in sharing the vision with the church. Having a strength in this area was common among the participants. P5 stated “my strength is casting the vision and setting the direction.” P2 claimed, “I think God's given me the ability to cast a vision, to dream big dreams, to think outside the box, to take risks, and then to rally people around that mission.” P7 asserted, “I am vision driven.” P12 said, “I'm good at casting vision for helping us kind of understand the big picture.” P5 supports this idea in saying “my strength is setting the vision and then raising people up to execute it.” P6 confidently said, “I can move people to take mountains. I'm a vision caster and a persuader.” When asked what leadership practice is essential to growing a church P12 aptly stated “you must have vision clarity.” He went on to express that a leader must know what opportunities a church should be pursuing and which ones a church should not be pursuing. P6 affirmed that his job is not necessarily to create all of the vision, but went on to say, “but I've gotta be the chief vision caster.” The job of the senior leader is clearly to paint a picture of what the organization will look like in the days and years to come. P6 also believes many churches

aren't growing because "they're not casting a vision that's big enough for people to give their lives to."

Culture Development

The development of the staff team and culture was paramount among the pastors. Knowing that their team collaborates to develop and execute the vision, these twelve pastors care deeply about the team. In keeping with a collaborative leadership approach the top leaders matter because they "determine the direction of the church" according to P6. P4 aptly said "I obsess about the culture that we have within the team; I think that is my primary responsibility." P6 said the choosing of leaders is likely his "second most important pastoral duty." P3 indicated that next to his own personal health "the team that I create is a big deal in the growth and health of the church." P11 indicated that "one of the things that has caused us to experience unbelievable growth is putting the right people in the right seats on the bus." P6 believes in the importance of the team so deeply that he has developed "a long process" for someone to even get on the team. Some of the attributes they are looking for in staff are risk takers (P6), strong vision casters (P6), builders of teams (P6).

Systems and processes

The participants commonly understand that systems are integral to church growth and see themselves as builders of systems and most count this as one of their core strengths and duties. The participants have systematized many things including leadership development, visitor flow, and visitor follow up. P12 expressed that "culture is who we are, systems are how we get things done." Even pastoral care has been systematized. For example, the system that P12 has devised for this is to assign each staff

member a section of the church membership. P12 himself is responsible for the church board, the staff, and the top 60 givers. Each pastor is required to make a certain number of phone calls and visits each week to their pastoral care list. P12 also has a 100-day training system for all new hires in which they are provided with a ministry playbook and are trained in the ministry processes. When asked about addressing church decline, P4 indicated that his first response when something is in decline is to ask “is this a systems issue?” This sentiment underscores the participant’s belief that proper systems are necessary for church growth. P11 emphatically stated “if we can teach pastors in the Nazarene church how to build effective processes our churches would be far more likely to grow.” An interesting observation was that the participants talked far more about their systems than their services. This may be due to the fact that not one question was directly linked to their services. Yet it was obvious the participants were much more interested than building great services, they were interested in building great systems. In doing so, they are leading the organization to grow rather than myopically focusing on specific ministries. The building of systems is how the participants work ‘on’ the church rather than working ‘in’ the church.

Metrics (Lead and Lag indicators)

Church growth is measured in numbers. The twelve participants have many metrics they are watching but four specific metrics emerged as common and prevalent. The participants, in keeping with common business practices, refer to these as “lead indicators.” A lead indicator is a predictive metric. A lag indicator is the desired metric. As lead indicators increase the lag indicator will also increase. P4 said it this way “if our lead indicators go up, then attendance has to go up.” P4 also captured the sentiment of

these metrics for the participants in stating that having the correct lead indicators “functions as a flywheel for church growth.” The term “flywheel” comes from Collins (2001) in which he says organizational growth happens when small wins build on each other over time and gain so much momentum that growth happens almost automatically. In terms of church growth, the lag indicator would be worship attendance, and the lead indicators (aka *small wins*) would be the following four common metrics.

A Discipleship Class

A common metric amongst the participants is to have a basic discipleship class for new people to attend. They had different names for the classes but the same purposes of introducing people to the faith and to the church. P5 called his “The Rooted Class.” P9 called his “The Basics Class.” P4 called his The Activation Class.” The participants agree that participation in these classes always precedes and indicates growth.

Baptisms

The sacrament of baptism was also a common lead indicator among the participants. P2 aptly expressed the overall sentiment of all twelve participants concerning baptism when he said, “we believe that the ultimate expression of a changed life and celebrating that is baptism.” Several of them indicated they have very public goals concerning the number of baptisms they are pursuing. P2 has a goal to baptize 1000 people by 2025 and P10 has a goal to baptize 500 in the next three years. P5 says the number of annual baptisms is one of the metrics he always knows off hand. P6 claims that baptisms are “an indication of whether we're reaching people and that we're effective.” P10 has a visual that expresses the value these pastors place on baptism. He

painted the front wall of the church black and has everyone who is baptized signs the wall. He claims this is central to creating a “culture of baptism.”

First-Time Guests

A third lead indicator of church growth is the number of first-time guests to worship. P4 notes that as the number of first-time guests goes up “attendance has to go up.” P6 says “if we don't have a certain number of new guests, we're not gonna change the world.” Both P1 and P10 call this lead indicator “visitor flow.”

Serving

The number of people serving in the church was also a highly touted metric among the participants as an indicator of church growth. P12 noted that at one point his staff was confronted with the difficulty of measuring this metric but decided to “really do the hard work because we believe that's a benchmark that's important” not only for the spiritual growth of their people but as a lead indicator of their growth. P11 also highlighted the number of people serving is not only a lead indicator of church growth but of church health. He says, “the number of people serving in a ministry causes us to be healthy” and “health always precedes growth.” P5 noted that if a church is growing and if the people are growing there will be a “push towards serving.” P2 values a culture of serving and notes they “have a really high percentage of adults who serve,” and has set a summer goal this year to “get 77 new people involved in ministry.” At the time of our interview, the number had already passed 81. P2 further noted that serving “keeps you on mission” which is why it’s a valued lead indicator to the participants, who understand the mission of the church as being to grow.

Thinking, writing, reflecting, and praying

A commonality that was interesting to uncover was the time the participants intentionally give to reflection, prayer, writing. The participants understand that they partake in a holy work and value connecting to God and being led by him in all matters. Time given to think, pray, and write enables a leader to better understand the solutions to their particular problems. P5 begins every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday in an hour of prayer with his staff. He cites “hearing God’s voice” through prayer is foundational to his leadership and said, “when we hear God's voice, we know we're not gonna make mistakes.”

In keeping with the notion of collaborative leadership, as featured in the findings of research question one, he desires to have a staff culture that is listening to the voice of God. Therefore, he will not hire a staff member who cannot spend an hour in prayer. Additionally, he claims the intimacy found in prayer together is the key to both staff retention and unity, which is necessary for church growth. When asked what he believes are the most effective pastoral practices that lead to church growth he said, “I wish they would pray with their staff on a regular basis for a long period of time.” P9 also has a very specific format for spending time in prayer and reflection. He spends “eight to 12 hours” every Tuesday on his front porch to “think, write, and pray.” He also has two weeks set aside in which he spends the entire week on his porch engaging in prayer, writing, and thinking. He claims this time has been catalytic in his leadership. P4 lamented his concern for these activities by saying “I think most senior leaders don't spend nearly enough time thinking. And they don't spend nearly enough time writing.” He claims the lack of reflection through thinking, prayer, and writing causes most pastors

to “use programs from other churches” rather than to know the specific vision God has for their specific church. P4, being highly influenced by the founder of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, and his pattern of writing quarterly updates, writes an email every Monday to his church board that is “literally just a summary of the progress we've made and my thinking of where we are right now.”

Innovation

Ministry innovation was a significant commonality among the twelve participants. P4 clearly described innovation as being “a church’s specific solution to their specific problems with their specific resources.” P4 further expressed a disdain for “innovation for the sake of innovation” and for using “someone else's solution.” The participants equate innovation to growth and a lack of innovation to decline. P11 expressed the sentiment of the participants well when he said, “If you are an innovative strategic thinker and you can think about how to do things in a new way, then you're gonna grow.” P2 in describing the risk-taking, innovative nature of pastors of growing churches claimed that “the pastors who are leading churches that are growing are wired differently.” P6, when describing what makes some leaders able to grow a church, stated “you gotta be a risk taker” and cites that churches who aren’t growing are led by pastors who are “too passive and too risk averse.” Many examples of innovative ministry were given by the participants. For example, P2 has a satellite church in three other Nazarene districts, two of which are in completely different states. P11, in addressing the pressing need to create an additional worship service to accommodate growth, added a service that ran simultaneous to his current service. In one service he would preach first, and then they would have the music portion of the service. In the other service the music would

come first and then the preaching, enabling him to preach in both services. P11 also added in a 12-foot by 20-foot digital Lego wall in the common area where people like to mingle after the services. P11 also built a football field for the community to utilize. P3, who has a specific staff position called the “creative pastor,” notes that he believes churches need not build bigger buildings, thus incurring debt, but rather think of “more creative uses of our ministry spaces.” P9 supported this practice in stating, “to grow you just have to deal with things that are before you in an innovative way.”

Annual Evangelism Plan

As indicated earlier, a common lead indicator is new families attending worship. A common practice among the pastors is to have an annual evangelism plan that includes attractional events designed to increase “visitor flow” as P1 and P10 refer to it. P10 stated his annual plan is to have two attractional events and two Sunday guest speakers for the purpose of “getting people onto our property so they know we're here.” P11 credits much of their growth to an annual Christmas musical, which over 10,000 people attend during an eight-day span. P9 also credits an annual Easter production as their prominent attractional event. He cited that creating this awareness is what leads many to attend the church for the first time, even if years later. P1 who also has multiple large scale community events cited the purpose of these events as being “to get as many people on the campus as possible, have a lot of fun, gather their names, addresses, and phone numbers, and then follow up with them to either invite them back to another event or to market our sermon series.” P12 has partnered with the mayor of his city to provide children’s ministry at community events, which he recognizes “is not normal.” P4 explained that his answer to many pastors of declining churches who “say the attractional

model doesn't work anymore” is to say, “just because you don't know how to do it doesn't mean it doesn't work anymore.”

Transfers Come for the Bible and the Mission

When asked about their growth, all the participants acknowledged their growth was a combination of conversion and transfer growth, with conversions being the predominant category. The participants expressed a common understanding of transfers. P9, in referring to conversion and transfer growth said, “those are different things in my opinion.” While they realize that people do come for the programs offered by larger churches, they largely understand that transfers coming to their church are largely, as P10 calls them, “bible-illiterate.” P9 noted that the transfers that have come to his church come “from non-life-giving churches and they don't even know how to get to heaven.” P6 believes that the growth he has experienced from transfers is because they come from churches who have lost a lot of people because their “leaders are too passive and too risk averse.” He believes Christians see timid leadership as “a lack of faith” and want to be in churches that are on mission and are “they're looking for somebody to do something.” P11 stated that Christians attend his services, they are amazed and excited that he preaches the bible, as they want to be in a place that boldly proclaims the gospel. These Christians are quick to leave churches that aren't “bible driven.” P3's experience in recent years has been that transfers can be largely classified as “searchers.” They are coming from churches that have no mission, no innovation, and no clear preaching that expresses “that there's somebody in charge of all of this and that his plans are good and that he has a plan for me and that he loves me and that he can bring people together.”

Leadership Development

A common practice of the participants is to be developing leaders. The participants operate their churches as leadership incubators in which they are raising new leaders at all levels through intentional mentoring, equipping, and training. P6 passionately claimed “the number one way to grow a church is to raise up leaders.” P5 added that the pastor must set the vision “then raise up people to execute it.” Many of the participants have a very developed system for the development of leaders. For example, P6 has three systems in place to develop leaders. First, he has a program called “\$50 a week people.” These are church volunteers who are paid \$50 a week for five hours a week to give them a deeper taste of leadership than most volunteers. Second, he started a “leadership school” in collaboration with one of our denomination’s universities. In this school the students attend classes online and serve in the church as part of the curriculum. Third, he has a “leadership residency” program in which young leaders spend one year at the church learning leadership and adding value to the staff. P5 also has a school of leadership that works in partnership with a Christian university. These students are at the church every morning for virtual classes with university professors and in-person classes with church leadership. During the four years a student is involved in the school their ministry responsibility increases. These systems for developing leaders are how the participants are creating leaders to execute the vision God has for the church.

Relational

A common leadership practice among the participants is relationships. Relationships came up in every single interview and several of the participants referred to themselves as being “very relational” or “highly relational,” including P1, P9, P12, P11,

P2, and P3. In a very humble manner, they described their strengths in relationships. P2 said “I can establish a connection with people very quickly.” P5 claimed that God has “created us to be relational.” P12 said through relationships he is able to “take on the stress and the burdens of other people” and noted that others “can sense I have compassion and can feel the burdens for people.” He also connected the notion of church growth to relationship when he said, “we better be excellent at learning to connect when new people show up.” P3 said “I build deep relationships.” P9 claimed he is “very, very relational” and attributes this skill as being catalytic to the start of their growth “key to our sustained growth.” He and his wife practice the gift of hospitality as often as they can, which includes having board meeting at his home and having “tons of new people over to our home.” He refers to the fact that “everybody comes to Jesus through relationships” so relationships should be at the core of our leadership if we want our church to grow. He summed up his view on the importance of relationships in church growth by saying “everything rises and falls on relationships.” This draw to relationships is likely a driver of the commonality of collaborative leadership.

A Disdain for Decline

The participants have a common disdain for decline. They commonly saw decline as something to be immediately addressed. When asked how he feels about decline P6 said “all hands on deck, the ship is going down.” When asked the same question P7 said decline “raises the hair on the back of my neck.” P12 says decline “creates a sense of urgency” in him. Both P4 and P7 said their first response to decline is to discover which system is broken, indicating as previously noted, that healthy systems lead to church growth. It should be noted that many of the participants experienced a season of decline

before they experienced growth. P9 indicated a “staff rebellion” in which a couple of staff members went “sideways” and they lost about 300 people, which then afforded them the opportunity to readdress their vision and entered a more significant season of growth. P1 reminisced how he lost one hundred people during a two-week period in his second year at the church over a theological debate on creationism. But then he added the church culture changed “because we had an exodus of the old and an entrance new people.” This question revealed that the participants have a growth mindset over a fixed mindset.

3. What common leadership principles and practices do the senior pastors believe will emerge as vital for church growth post-COVID?

Research question three was interested in what the participants see as the leadership needed to address the impact that the COVID pandemic has had on churches.

Adaptive Leadership

The participants uniformly understand that the church has been fragmented and fractured in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants acknowledged similar experiences. First, they lost significant numbers of people during COVID. Some of these members may be worshipping virtually but due to the anonymity of virtual worship the participants are left to wonder if these people are worshipping virtually or have been lost altogether. Second, many parishioners have returned. Anecdotally speaking, several of the pastors believe about 70% have returned. Third, they gained significant numbers of new people. Fourth, they have seen a significant increase in virtual worshippers but are having a hard time knowing who is watching. P7 aptly described this phenomenon by saying “people are quiet quitting the church.”

The solution offered by the participants is to exercise adaptive leadership as a means to rebuild the community. Adaptive leadership is how organizations face tough challenges caused by environmental and social changes in which the old way of thinking does not work (Burch & Baumgartner, 2019). P6 in describing leadership in a post COVID world said, “you gotta be willing to adapt and move quickly. Instead of leaders saying, ‘we can’t,’ you better figure it out quick and adapt.” The participants agreed that the speed of leadership has increased, therefore as P5 suggested, “the number one thing in leadership post COVID is that you gotta be willing to adapt, pivot, and move quickly.” P4 fully supports that COVID has brought on “a new culture in church” and then added “however, if leadership doesn't change and choose to continue to cultivate that culture, it will regress.”

None of the participants are arguing to get rid of virtual worship. In the words of P9 it's “here to stay.” The predominant understanding of virtual worship among the participants is, as P6 so succinctly stated, “your front door is now the sermon online.” P8 added that the difference in virtual worship following the pandemic is that “our online ministry went from being informational to invitational.”

Summary

The current study was designed to find the common leadership practices from the lived experience of 12 senior pastors in The Church of the Nazarene in the United States whose churches are numerically growing. Chapter IV has provided a comprehensive overview of the findings for the three research questions proposed in this study. Chapter V will address the implications of these findings, an explanation of how the results of this

study have expanded the existing body of knowledge concerning pastoral leadership practices that lead to church growth, as well as suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The current research, a qualitative study, explored the lived church growth experiences of twelve senior pastors in The Church of the Nazarene denomination in the United States. The purpose of this qualitative study was to find the leadership commonalities among the twelve participants that led their churches to numerical growth. Chapter V will summarize the findings and themes in relation to the literature review provided in Chapter II. Additionally, Chapter V will include an overview of both the delimitations and limitations of this study, as well as a discussion on further research suggestions to help answer the following research questions:

1. What is the common leadership style(s) among twelve senior pastors in the church of the Nazarene whose churches are experiencing growth?
2. What are the common leadership principles and practices among the senior pastors that have been effective in driving the growth of their churches?
3. What common leadership principles and practices do the senior pastors believe will emerge as vital for church growth post-COVID?

Summary of Findings

In answering research question one, this research found that collaborative leadership is the common leadership style among the participants. In answering research question two, 11 common themes were revealed. Those themes are visionary leadership,

culture development, systems, metrics, reflection and prayer, an annual evangelism plan, a specific understanding of transfers, leadership development, relationships, and a disdain for decline. In answering research question three, this study found that the participants agreed that the COVID pandemic has fractured the church and the solution to that problem will be to build community within the church through adaptive leadership.

Discussion

The literature review in Chapter II identified a gap in the current literature concerning pastoral leadership principles that lead to church growth (Davis et al., 2010; Ham, 2012; Rogers, 2021). The current era of church has ushered us into uncharted territory in which we simply do not yet know what type of leadership will succeed (Bolsinger & Penno, 2017). The findings of this study contribute to minimizing the gap in the literature concerning this problem and give further support to the findings in the literature review. Findings from all three research questions corroborate much of what was uncovered in the literature review outlined in Chapter II.

Research question one found that collaboration is the common leadership style among the participants. The research by Demesi et al. (2022) affirmed this approach to church leadership by noting that church growth routinely occurs when the pastor encourages and involves the participation of the congregation in the vision process, as this helps everyone to feel as though they belong. The idea of “teamwork at the top” (Kotter, 2012, p. 171) is also a strategy that non-profits would be wise to incorporate. Too many non-profits, including churches, have fallen apart when a long-time dynamic leader leaves the organization. Non-profits would experience less volatility and, as Kotter suggested, be better prepared for a rapidly changing world with a shared leadership team,

rather than reliance on a single, dominant leader. Collaborative leadership stands in contrast to autocratic leadership. Amanchukwu et al. (2015) described autocratic leadership as an extreme form of leadership that has some benefits but tends to leave staff feeling resentful. This finding further supported the claim by Cincala & Saucedo (2019) that pastors whose leadership style is team-oriented, goal-oriented, and relational have a higher annual growth rate than other leadership styles.

Research question two found that the participants were visionary leaders. The research from Grandy (2013) affirms that the future of the church is dependent on visionary leaders. This assertion is corroborated by multiple studies (Chang, 2021; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021b; Haskell et al., 2016b; Powell et al., 2019; Thiessen et al., 2018). The lived experience of the twelve participants underscored the claims made by Estes (2022) that churches tend to be healthier when a pastor has a clear sense of God's leading. When asked what leadership practice is essential to growing a church P12 aptly stated "you must have vision clarity." He went on to express that a leader must know what opportunities a church should be pursuing and which ones a church should not be pursuing. Estes affirms that vision includes that a leader knows what endeavors the church should not pursue, thus preventing a waste of time and resources on unfruitful ministries. The scorn from P4 for leaders who simply copy a vision from other churches accentuate the declarations from Earls (2016) and Thiessen et al. that a healthy congregation has a mission that is unique to them and distinguishes them rather than imitating other churches.

Responses to research question two also uncovered that relationships are a commonality among the participants. The literature review was replete with studies

affirming this characteristic as essential to church growth (Bobbitt, 2018; Chen & Sriphon 2021; Dreyer, 2015; Gaillardetz & Gaillardetz, 2020; Stewart, 2021). The intentional and natural development of relationships among the participants affirmed the literature reviews emphasis that life-giving relationships in a church are essential to both health and growth.

The responses to research question two found that a reliance on the supernatural, while likely impossible to quantify, was a significant commonality among the participants. Their emphasis on prayer and creating a leadership culture where “we operate from that place from a place of his presence and hearing his voice,” as P5 expressed it, was an emergent theme that aligns with the literature review. Multiple studies concur with the assessment that growth comes through the actions and power of God (Dreyer, 2015; Haskell et al., 2018; McIntosh, 2021; Thiessen et al., 2018). The sentiment was surmised by Chang (2021) who indicated that to grow a church, the church leadership must rely on God’s leading, making it paramount that the leaders are spending significant time with God in reflection, writing, and prayer.

The innovative nature of the participants was also a finding from the responses to research question two that parallels the literature review. The research by Thiessen et al. (2018) boldly claimed that innovation is vital to congregational vitality. The lived experience of the participants brought that claim to life. The study conducted by McMullin (2013) shared that church growth is often found among churches who, rather than waiting for people to come, proactively and innovatively attract people to come. The innovative ideas and the annual evangelism plans devised by the participants are exactly what McMullin was describing.

The findings for research question three specifically support the literature reviews contention that adaptive leadership will be dominant post-COVID. Pakpahan's (2021) research of adaptive leadership posited that churches who adapt to the changing culture brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic will lead the charge for church growth and vitality in the future. The findings of this study are in support of that assertion. Cote's (2022) research on adaptive leadership highlighted the need for leaders to learn new ways to address and resolve problems. Jackson and Williams (2021) affirmed that adaptive leadership is the current emerging leadership practice among pastors of growing churches. Burch and Baumgartner (2019) predicted that adaptive leadership is needed in this era of shifting priorities. Adaptive leadership, as outlined by Burch and Baumgartner involves observing the patterns around you, interpreting those patterns, and then designing interventions to address the challenge you have discovered. The findings from the lived experience of the twelve participants in this study affirmed that an adaptive leadership style as being necessary to solve the general problem of church decline and the specific problems brought on by the COVID pandemic. P2, when addressing adaptive leadership as being necessary post-COVID, said "We gotta shift from that survival mindset to thriving mindset." This statement stressed the same point concluded by the research from Barker Jackson and Williams (2021), who contended that we will not thrive in a new environment without learning new ways.

Implications

The current study validates that there are leadership commonalities among senior pastors of numerically growing congregations. As outlined in Chapter I, this study offers three points. First, an understanding of the pastoral leadership practices implemented by

contemporary pastors that result in growth. Second, by replicating these practices other churches might gain a more effective approach to leadership and experience the growth they desire. It is reasonable to assume that the findings in this study are transferable to a wide number of churches. Third, the practices in this study should be used to train current and future ministers. As Strunk et al., (2017) noted, a large percentage of pastors believe their theological education was inadequate to prepare them for reality of the pastorate. It would be wise for our seminaries, colleges, and those to whom are given the charge to train ministers to teach the art of collaborative leadership and the practices uncovered in this research.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations are the researcher's intentional efforts to narrow the scope of the research (Hobbs, 2021; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). Delimitations are purposeful decisions the researcher makes to limit or define the boundaries of the study and give the reader context to understand the research. Limitations are the influences that a researcher cannot control (Hobbs; Roberts & Hyatt).

Delimitations

Three limitations were put into place to focus the research on the lived experience of each individual pastor. First, although The Church of the Nazarene is a global Christian denomination, only pastors from within the United States were included as participants. This delimitation was put in place due to the significance of ministry contextualization. Second, no pastors outside The Church of the Nazarene denomination were invited to participate. The reason for this is the researcher's desire to explore the experience of Nazarene pastors and their specific frame of reference within the

denomination. Because of this delimitation, issues associated with the experiences of pastors in other denominations may be neglected thus affecting transferability. Third, the minimum size of the church for this study was 250. This eliminates a large majority of churches in the denomination, who are smaller than 250.

Limitations

According to both Gustafsson (2017) and Merriam (2009), there are more benefits than limitations to collective case designs, yet a collective case study method is not without limitations. It is important to acknowledge those limitations (Yin, 2012). Five limitations to this research have been identified. The first limitation was that this study was somewhat homogenous. There was a lack of diversity among the participants in that all of them are Anglo. A second limitation was that no persons other than the senior pastor from each church were interviewed. The findings of this current study were limited to the interaction of the participant and would only be enriched by additional interviews as lay leaders, members, and attendees of the church would likely have had much to offer on the leadership of the senior pastor if given the opportunity. A third limitation was connected to the notion that the investigator plays a pivotal role in collecting and analyzing the data, underscoring the importance that the one conducting the study has reached a level of expertise to conduct such a qualitative study.

In this current study, the researcher completed the coding and development of themes and findings. Merriam (2009) indicated that there is not a set of guidelines for constructing the final report leaving the researcher to rely on his or her own instincts and the reader to rely on anecdotal information that can be difficult to verify (Adams & Lawrence, 2019), meaning that the interpretation of the data is subject to the researcher.

If steps are not taken to ensure validity and reliability, the research is left vulnerable to potentially weak interpretation. A fourth limitation was that qualitative research, specifically in case studies, relies on anecdotal information that is difficult to verify and subject to the interpretation of the researcher (Adams & Lawrence). The participants in this study were current pastors who may wish to portray themselves in the best possible manner. This potentially opens the door for self-reporting to be somewhat disingenuous. A fifth limitation of this study stemmed from the self-reporting nature of the interviews. Self-reporting often limits research studies because those being interviewed may be hesitant to acknowledge their shortcomings (Pyrzczak & Tcherni-Buzzeo, 2018) or can even embellish their strengths, some call this the *halo effect* (Puls et al., 2014). This limitation may be unavoidable in qualitative descriptive studies as it is impossible to fully understand the experiences of another person. Although these limitations are present, the conclusions reached are considered to be valid and reliable due to strict adherence to the approved research protocol.

Recommendations for Further Research

The results of this research described the leadership commonalities among 12 senior pastors in the United States region of The Church of the Nazarene. The major commonalities led to the findings explored in Chapter IV. What follows are recommendations for further research based on the results of this research.

The first recommendation for future research is the examination of a *growth mindset* versus a *fixed mindset* in senior pastors. Anecdotally, there seems to be a mindset among some pastors that a church can and should grow whereas other pastors do not seem to value growth or believe it to be achievable. Research in this area may provide

insight into the motivation for pastors of growing churches and how to replicate this mindset among clergy.

Further research should also include investigating the leadership influences of pastors in growing churches. In this cross-case analysis, it was revealed that the younger participants in this study were highly influenced by current secular business leaders (Jeff Bezos of Amazon, author Simon Sinek, author Patrick Lencioni, and Chic-fil-a) while the older participants were influenced by aging religious leaders (Earl Lee, H.B. London, and John Maxwell). Research in this area might reveal the informal training being offered to pastor leaders that our formal training institutions might consider offering.

Further research should also be conducted with participants from additional denominations and cultures. This research was focused on one denomination, namely The Church of the Nazarene, from one country, the United States. Addressing church growth and decline from a broader population would provide a more robust understanding from varying theological perspectives and cultural backgrounds.

Several other commonalities were partially exposed in this research and may warrant a more complete investigation. For example, multiple participants commonly shared the personality trait of #8 on the enneagram scale and the High-D trait from the DISC scale. Also, 10 of the 12 participants did not attend a seminary and have no desire or plan to do so in the future.

Lastly, further research should be pursued from the perspective of congregational members. This study was focused on the lived experiences of senior pastors. Further insight may be gleaned from the lived experiences of the church members.

Summary

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of twelve senior pastors in The Church of the Nazarene denomination in the United States in an effort to uncover leadership commonalities that directly led to numerical church growth. Data was collected through an open-ended interview. The results of this study indicate that the collaborative leadership style is common among pastors of growing churches. The findings also point to eleven leadership commonalities among pastors of growing churches. Those themes are visionary leadership, culture development, systems, metrics, reflection and prayer, an annual evangelism plan, a specific understanding of transfers, leadership development, relationships, and a disdain for decline. Lastly, the findings of this current study indicate that adaptive leadership is needed to address the fractured church community in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

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