SPRITUAL FORMATION: A MODEL TO STRENGTHEN THE MISSION,
OPERATION, AND COMMITMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES

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ABSTRACT

THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Spiritual formation, the practice of intentional spiritual disciplines like fasting, silence, studying, and fellowship, should be the heart of growth in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina small churches. This practice assists congregants in developing closeness with God and relationships with others. Amidst a steady decline in national church attendance since 1992, few of today’s African-American Church ministries address the need for spiritual formation. This thesis explores this critical issue at the local level through interviews with pastors and church leaders, who describe their churches’ current efforts to foster spiritual formation in congregants. The findings are used to propose a model for local church leadership to promote community members’ spiritual formation. This model includes the thesis of applicable biblical passages and encourages attention to the Great Commission and Great Commandment of Christ—which all can assist church leadership in revitalizing missions, operations, and their commitments to developing the local African-American Church.

ABSTRACT LENGTH: 148 WORDS
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I dedicate this degree to grandfather and brother Pierre; love and miss you deeply! Finally, to my loving and supportive wife, Andrea: my deepest gratitude for support, patience, and encouragement throughout my graduate studies. To family and friends, a debt of gratitude for the numerous years of support has given the establishment to working persistently. I could not have done it without you and for being there when the times got rough are much appreciated and noted. To my pastor, Dr. Stevenson, thank you for your enthusiasm, mind, and delicate direction. I can’t start to envision the sacrifices you have made as a minister, however, please realize that your ministry has impacted my life. Thank my friend Cheryl for your understanding and wisdom that has allowed me to progress in ministry and to inspire me to keep learning.
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INTRODUCTION

On any given Sunday, the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina area appears more divided than it does on any other day of the week. Because this is the designated worship day for most faiths represented in the local area, residents attend the churches of their choice—a choice based on family history, current residence, race, accessibility, church mission, denomination or other personal factors. Statistics reveal that nearly half of North Carolina’s population, 48 percent or 4.5 million people, practice some form of religion and that Catholicism is the predominant faith in both Wake and Orange Counties; however, there are another four million people, or 52 percent, who do not adhere to any faith and do not likely attend church at all. Faith perceptions in this group and perceptions among the third largest worshipper group in the state, 565,000 non-denominational Christians, can provide a local church snapshot that gives insight into why area church memberships, especially at African-American Christian churches, seem to be dwindling. The local worship scene mirrors national trends: While there are more than 1,000 new churches started each year, more than 4,000 churches close, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, 156 million people are considered “churchless,” meaning they have not attended Christian worship service outside of funerals or weddings for the last six months. The number

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2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.


6 Ibid.
of churchless American is enough for the group to become the eighth most populated country in the world; however, 62 percent of the churchless population consider themselves Christians.\(^7\)

These numbers suggest that something in the current Christian worship landscape, especially as it relates to connecting with other Christians in a conventional church, may be missing. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed in a 2014 Barna Group study indicated they were looking for something better spiritually than they had ever experienced in their lives.\(^8\) This survey seeks to examine whether that missing “something” is a spiritual formation element that many in the churchless population believe they cannot find in a traditional church environment. It also seeks to offer a model for guiding churches and individuals (both the churched and churchless) to achieve the kind of spiritual formation offering that increases the connection that professing Christians have to local congregations and, in turn, boosts the active congregation memberships that lead to rewarding spiritual growth in the individual and an elevated, directed fellowship among the church body.

**Statement of the Problem**

The predominant practicing Catholicism in Wake and Orange Counties is a direct bridge to spiritual formation practices that have been engaged since the time of ancient Catholic religious orders. Both domestic and foreign migration to the state, especially from northeastern states like New York and New Jersey, have created a rise in the number of practicing Catholic

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\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.
adherents living in North Carolina.\textsuperscript{10} People who move from other geographies bring their faith practices with them.

Almost half of the adults eighteen and over who currently live in North Carolina (48 percent) were born outside of the state.\textsuperscript{11} Those who acknowledge themselves as professing Catholics already likely have had exposure to and guidance in spiritual formation as a deliberate practice. Christians in local area African-American churches do not always have the same guidance or commitment to spiritual formation, primarily because it is not a typical offering in these congregations. As a result, many who proclaim a Christian-based faith and feel disconnected from current church leaders and fellowship have turned to alternative Sabbath Day practices that do not include conventional worship services or membership at a local church.

One reason some of this migration away from the church may have happened lies in continuous advancements in technology, the convenience of the Internet and the popularity of streaming video. Christian adherents can watch live streaming videos of worship services, sermons, lectures, workshops and church events online or on their mobile devices. San Jose, California-based communications and Internet services corporation Cisco reports that online video traffic will account for 55 percent of all consumer Internet traffic in 2016.\textsuperscript{12} Additionally, a Monk Development study reveals that 46 percent of churchgoers say their church’s website influenced their decision to choose the church, and 64 percent of these churchgoers say the church’s website highly influences their decision to participate in the church.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Carolina Religion.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
These numbers are instructive for a couple of opposing reasons. They indicate that the more connected a church is to current and emerging technology, the greater possibility it has for a wider membership reach. However, this advantage, which most churches welcome in the twenty-first century, also can work against a congregation “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.”

Another reason migrations away from church have risen to an all-time high is a general discontent. Churchless people have often cited feeling disconnected as a primary reason they no longer attend church, if they ever attended at all. Former Washington Post reporter, journalism professor and author John Fountain’s description of his disconnection from church life in 2005 is still relevant in the second decade of the twenty-first century:

I am the grandson of a pastor and am myself a licensed minister. I love God and I love the church. I know church-speak and feel as comfortable shouting hallelujahs and amens and lifting my hands in the sanctuary as I do putting on my socks. I have danced in the spirit, spoken in tongues, and proclaimed Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior. I once arrived faithfully at the door of every prayer meeting and went to nearly every Bible study and month-long revival. I attended umpteen services, even the midnight musicals and my church's annual national meetings…Yet I now feel disconnected. I am disconnected. Not necessarily from God, but from the church.

What happened? Probably the same thing that has happened to thousands, if not tens of thousands, of African American men who now file into coffee shops or bowling alleys or baseball stadiums on Sundays instead of heading to church, or who lose themselves in the haze of mowing the lawn or waxing their cars. Somewhere along the way, for us, for me, the church—the collective of black churches of the Christian faith, regardless of denomination—lost its meaning, its relevance. It seems to have no discernible message for what ails the 21st-century black male soul.

Fountain’s discontent echoes the disconnection expressed by thousands of eighteen- to thirty-three-year-old millennials, 80 percent of whom, according to a Barna Group study cited by the

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14 Heb. 10:25. All scripture references taken from the Net Bible (http://www.bible.org, 1996-2005), unless otherwise noted.

National Black Robe Regiment, said church is not important to them. Millennials want a different church than their parents; they “don’t look for a church facility that caters to the whims of pop culture. They want a community that calls them to deeper meaning.”

What seems to be missing for churchless, never-churched and discontent adherents is the church’s proper attention to nurturing an inner life for its individual members. Church leaders who pay attention to their congregations’ dwindling numbers alone—who seek increased membership for numbers’ sake or who seek to have an impressive showing compared to other churches—are missing a valuable opportunity to embrace the core tenets of spiritual formation. They miss the chance to emphasize individual spiritual growth for congregants and help those congregants build their spiritual lives in Christ from within. Over time, their congregants begin to lead the lives of quiet desperation described by John Fountain. When they show up in the sanctuary for worship, they know at what point in the service they should bow their heads in prayer, and their bodies know through automatic reflex when hands should be lifted and when the voice should utter song or praise. These spiritual gestures, as ritual, become rote activities performed on cue out of habit.

A church’s decline is typically caused by factors beyond a mere drop in membership. In some cases, church leaders struggle to address the state of their churches’ spiritual health because they harbor a fear rooted in Christian legalism. The arbitrary moral codes and rules imposed by the church organization become more important than the Gospel that saves souls. In fact, 81 percent of the self-identified Christian participants in a Barna Group study defined


\hspace{1cm}^{17} Ibid.
spiritual health and maturity as “trying hard to follow the rules described in the Bible.” If this sampling of participants is any indication of the behaviors of the larger Christian population, the Bible is viewed as a collection of rules rather than a source for spiritual fortification and guidance.

On some levels, the lack of a spiritual formation function in African-American churches may be a matter of not understanding spiritual growth as a discipline. “Many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity. People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process.” Some Christian adherents are not able to clearly define how their churches view spiritual maturity. Among those who gave a substantive response in the Barna Group study, the most common replies were having a relationship with Jesus (16 percent), practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study (9 percent), living according to the Bible (8 percent), being obedient (8 percent), being involved in church (7 percent), and having concern for others (6 percent).

The responses of churchgoers about spiritual maturity do not skew too far from those of their pastoral leadership. While almost nine out of ten pastors said that a lack of spiritual maturity is the most significant or one of the largest problems facing the nation, a minority of them believe that spiritual immaturity is a problem in their own specific church. In their

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20 Ibid.

perceptions, the problem looms large but lies beyond their own church doors. Only a small number of churches has a written statement expressing what they are looking for in spiritually mature people, and pastors have not shown a working knowledge or clarity of scripture passages to support a real definition of spiritual maturity or outline its processes. Three-quarters of pastors gave a generic answer to this query in the survey, with one in five offering a semi-generic response such as “Romans” or “the life of Christ.”

Finally, another hindrance to spiritual maturity, and ultimately, spiritual formation is that pastors often favor activities over perspectives when they define spiritual maturity. They measure congregant spirituality based on the congregants’ practice of spiritual disciplines (19 percent), involvement in church activities (15 percent), witnessing to others (15 percent), having a relationship with Jesus (14 percent), having concern for others (14 percent), applying the Bible to life (12 percent), being willing to grow spiritually (12 percent), and having knowledge of scripture (9 percent). These responses give rise to a need to reexamine the efforts of local church pastors and leaders to foster spiritual formation in their congregants.

Spiritual growth can be the key to understanding God's will and purpose for one’s life, as well as dealing with the daily challenges one might face in that life. As congregations work as a collective fulfilling Christ’s mission, church leaders should develop a better understanding of how worshipers can tap into spiritual disciplines in order to engage their faith and foster individual spiritual growth. Spiritual formation could empower the local African-American Christian church to see the vision God has for developing a healthier institution through vibrant

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
and fulfilled congregant disciples. It is a promising way to bring the fullness of the Deity into every aspect of church life.\textsuperscript{25}

**Statement of Purpose**

Amid a steady decline in church attendance since 1992,\textsuperscript{26} particularly in small African-American Christian churches, few current ministries address the need for spiritual formation. The purpose of this thesis is to explore this critical issue in local small churches through interviews with pastors and church leaders. Participants are asked to describe their churches’ current efforts in teaching spiritual formation, as well as any benefits and challenges to current spiritual formation practices. The findings are expected to raise awareness among these churches and their leaders of the clear and present challenges associated with revitalizing the Body of Christ, as well as emphasize the value of that awareness.

This thesis is significant for three reasons: It incorporates biblical insight as a tool to develop spiritual growth in congregants; it encourages existing congregations to be open to matters of spiritual formation; and it guides the church in equipping souls for Christ and ultimately building the church for God.

The findings of this thesis will be used to propose a model that local church leadership can follow to promote community members’ spiritual formation. This model will include the incorporation of biblical passages, as well as attention to the Great Commission and first great commandment\textsuperscript{27} of Christ, all of which can assist local churches and leadership in revitalizing their missions, operations, and commitment to spiritual growth.

\textsuperscript{25} Col. 2:9-10.
\textsuperscript{26} Church Decline.
\textsuperscript{27} Matt. 22: 35-40.
Statement of Limitations

The primary instrument used to collect data from this thesis is a survey designed to solicit information about participating churches’ efforts to implement spiritual formation in their missions, operations, and commitment to the Great Commission. The survey is available in both an online response format and a hard copy to give respondents some flexibility in responding. One limit of the survey design lies in the time constraint—both the duration of the thesis and the amount of time volunteer respondents have available to answer questions in the survey.

The survey is also limited in its need to balance the quantity of questions with both those that give clear demographic information as well as those that make specific inquiry about spiritual formation. These questions are asked of Church leaders from a leadership perspective and include neither the perceptions of individuals measuring their own spiritual maturation nor leaders responding about their individual spiritual growth. In the small sampling of local African-American Christian Church leaders, the respondents either fill multiple roles in their respective congregations, or they are pastors who primarily see the spiritual formation of the church body as a whole.

A major challenge to this thesis lies in the broad definition of spiritual formation itself. The term has become a catchphrase across congregations and gathers much attention based on its popularity and tendency to bring a progressive nature to existing Church missions and ministries. However, those who use the term often either fail to define it adequately or define it in entirely personal ways that are not necessarily connected to the Church. To some, it is a system of religious disciplines that extend from spiritual practices taken from ancient Catholic religious orders. To others, it is the process of evolving the spirit, even when that evolution is not connected to a specific congregation. At its heart, spiritual formation is not about being a lone wanderer and
experience spiritual growth in a vacuum. A blossoming definition of Spiritual Formation is the process of producing Christlikeness in followers of Jesus. It involves developing Christlike personal spiritual growth while simultaneously influencing and being influenced by others who may be on the same spiritual growth journey. One is motivated by the example of Jesus Christ’s life and behaviors to exact the same level of purity, obedience, growth and wisdom in his own life and for the lives of others he encounters on his daily journey.

According to Dallas Willard, “Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transformation of the inmost dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being transformed in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.” Spiritual formation seeks to make the individual so transformed at the core that his desire to be Christlike is a part of his natural demeanor.

Willard further defines the process of spiritual formation by prescribing a state of spiritual development one can undergo by practicing abstinence. Collectively, these practices are called “abstinence disciplines: meditation, solitude, simplicity, silence, frugality and fasting.” In each of these disciplines, one must give up something in order to ascend to a higher level of growth and understanding. Doing without something increases the appreciation for it. We “create a space that needs to be filled, and amazing things can happen when we open up spaces in our lives. It is easier to hear the voice of God when we practice silence because our world is


not filled with competing noises.”\textsuperscript{30} In a state of abstinence—or while practicing abstinence principles—both an individual and Church body is better prepared to be holy and not driven, controlled or distracted by the worldly things in their immediate environment.

Willard also prescribes engagement disciplines for those who commit to spiritual formation: study, worship, service, prayer, and fellowship.\textsuperscript{31} In each of these disciplines, one is engaged in an act that reinforces his commitment to honor God and live Christlike. Unlike abstinence disciplines, which foster the act of removing something from one’s life, engagement disciplines emphasize activities in which something is added. Michelle Lee-Barnewall reminds adherents that engagement disciplines are most often easier to practice.

The point is that in our culture we are conditioned to think that the most valuable way to do anything is to do or have more of it, and so we work more, consume more, learn more and get more friends on Facebook. We can then unwittingly transfer this way of thinking to our spiritual lives, and so we study more, pray more, fellowship more. The problem is not that such activities are bad or wrong…but that we have a difficult time seeing the importance of disciplines in which we don’t do or add something.\textsuperscript{32}

With engagement disciplines, one can measure time and knowledge and walk away feeling as if he has accomplished something tangible. For this reason, more congregants assign a greater value to engagement disciplines.

For the purposes of this survey, the researchers will define spiritual formation in alignment with Willard’s definition, which includes both abstinence and engagement disciplines. The limitation of this definition lies in the fact that the average lay person, as well as the local Church leaders commissioned for this survey, are not necessarily using this definition to respond


\textsuperscript{31} Willard, p. 158.

\textsuperscript{32} Abstinence.
to survey questions. This gives rise to yet another limitation: Some respondents have tried to provide answers about a subject which they have not clearly defined. Greater time would have been required to provide educational training to arrive at a consensus for the definition. Greater time would also be needed to survey both a broader spectrum of local congregations, as well as regional congregations. This would assist in providing a more innovative approach to spiritual formation and revitalization of the local church.

This thesis project does not attempt to prescribe a quantitative method of revitalizing the Church (i.e., a set quantity of members). Rather, the thesis seeks a qualitative approach for future awareness and a clear path of progressing toward spiritual formation in Church missions. The researcher’s goal is to equip, empower, and mobilize the local Church and its members use spiritual formation to engage in their respective ministries. There is a growing need for churches to create and implement mission strategies that will center on meeting the needs of the community through spiritual formation. These strategies should be biblically sound practices and policies that focus on: (1) turning visitors into members, (2) developing seasoned members (committed disciples), and (3) transforming from singular programs to expansive ministries that flourish and revive.

Statement of Methodology

A survey study was used to provide the most flexible means of obtaining responses from local participants, who are in different neighborhoods, based in communities with diverse social and economic demographics, and who have had varying lengths of time in leadership posts. The researchers solicited a random, yet diverse, cross-section of local African-American pastors and congregational leaders, and all anonymous respondents volunteered for the survey. The criteria set based on identifiable participants of small churches in the Raleigh-Durham community.
Based on the definitions of church sizes by USAChurches.org, the participating churches for this survey would be considered medium-sized churches, which have approximately fifty-one to 300 members.\textsuperscript{33} For its purposes, USAChurches.org states, “Church size does not refer to the physical size of the church building, or the number of seats in the church building, or even the number of people who are members of the church. Rather, size in our church directory refers to the church's average weekend attendance.”\textsuperscript{34} However, the participating churches for this thesis shall be defined as churches with 200 or fewer active members who attend services regularly (at least twice monthly) and/or submit monthly tithes.

The survey was available to respondents as a paper survey and online at a survey website. In cases where respondents were not able to complete surveys online or independently complete a paper survey, the researcher administered brief interviews and recorded partakers’ answers to questions related to the elements of spiritual formation. The thesis includes but is not limited to an interview, with a possible follow-up and the sharing of participating churches’ spiritual formation structures. This participant sampling was narrowed to ten participants who were willing to work on issues of revitalization for their own respective local churches and who were willing to provide information about their churches’ commitments to spiritual formation and their own understanding of the spiritual formation concept.

In all cases, the researcher secured consent for survey participation and consent for responses to be published as findings for this thesis. Online surveys were estimated to take about twenty-five to thirty minutes for completion. Live surveys with the researcher recording responses took, on average, about forty-five minutes. Participants were allowed to ask any


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
questions that arose during the survey and share other important opinions and factors related to the topic. There was no disadvantage for not completing any of the questions. All responses are confidential within the scope of the thesis.

The use of surveys has several benefits for efficiently conducting the study and assisting in better understanding the local African-American Church community. It is relatively inexpensive, with only the cost of printing for paper surveys and a nominal per-respondent cost online. The space given to elaborate after responses allows respondents to give participants a chance to describe the unique characteristics of their own congregations. This provides a more accurate response based on the observations of people who are actually living the experience. There is great flexibility in the survey, especially because it is provided in three different optional formats: online, paper and face-to-face interviews. In cases where more than one mode of survey research was necessary, responses were compiled into one data set for analysis. Finally, the anonymity of surveys makes the responses more dependable, as respondents are not likely to worry about consequences for sharing their observations. The candor of responses delivered in this manner makes them more reliable as truthful, unambiguous answers to survey questions.

This research seeks to analyze the challenges and hindrances placed on spiritual growth in local small African-American churches. Chapter 1 introduces the need for this research seen through a local lens. Statistics from the Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina geographical area offer a close look at the local church climate in order to closely examine why the spiritual formation element has been missing as a tangible offering for individual congregants. The chapter gives the Raleigh-Durham religious community backstory, telling what socio-economic factors and significant social shifts helped to shape the current organized worship circumstances. Chapter 2
makes the case for spiritual formation based on scriptural teachings, primarily from the Apostle Paul, and the life of Christ. Chapter 3 summarizes and evaluates the surveys submitted by anonymous local participants. It attempts to examine recurring corporate behaviors that might have led to the lack of spiritual formation guidance for congregants. Chapter 4 applies all the discoveries gathered to a working model for local churches to infuse spiritual formation into their current ministries. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings and offers potential solutions to local religious leaders for more active spiritual formation approaches. This final chapter also suggests possibilities for further investigation.

The discoveries of this thesis may give the local Church the opportunity to use spiritual formation as a tool to enhance existing ministries, increase the effectiveness of leaders, and connect meaningfully to the unchurched and never-churched. Further, it can serve as a training tool for local Church leadership to advance spiritual maturation. For churches that have not grown significantly over the past decade, these findings should serve as a catalyst in revitalizing their missions and enacting strategies that are sustainable for engaging spiritual formation.

**Theoretical Basis for the Project**

One of the under spoken drives for evangelicals and Church leaders is the sheer amount of competition that exists for congregants’–and would-be congregants–attention in the current electronic age. As consumers of news, products and services, opinions, beliefs and advertisements, the world population, which is about 7.4 billion people, heavily relies on the Internet and/or some electronic means of access. There are approximately 3.4 billion people with an Internet connection, most of whom live in Asia generally and China specifically.

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36 Ibid.
though the United States is among the countries with the highest penetration of users—meaning that about 80 percent of the population has an Internet connection.

Since the nature of communication has shifted over the first decade of the twenty-first century, this has prompted some Church congregations to shift how they deliver God’s message. Sixty-four percent of churchgoers who facilitate their church participation through the Internet say that they rely the most on watching sermons and worship services online and use their church’s website to search for opportunities to serve. These trends have prompted many church leaders to place a heavier emphasis on what they offer congregants and visitors online. In this attempt to reach believers at the source of their electronic information consumption, the Internet, some congregations have seen their face-to-face numbers for worship, Bible study, and fellowship spiral downward.

In online, television and display advertising, the competition is at times even fiercer. At every corner of a congregant’s life, there seems to be a company or influencer trying to make a sale for a product or service. A recent Media Dynamics, Inc. study reveals that “while a typical adult’s daily media consumption has grown from 5.2 hours in 1945 to 9.8 hours (or 590 minutes) currently, this has not been reflected in a huge spike in ad exposure.” Consumers, some of whom are congregants, have the choice to use a remote control to turn away from advertisements or watch previously recorded video on a DVR player. This is how they avoid seeing the 360 advertisements or the 5,000+ brands they are exposed to daily. Of those 360 ads, “only 150 to 155 are even noted [by consumers], and far fewer make a strong enough

37 Church Online.
39 Ibid.
impact to be recalled, make an impression, and ultimately, make a sale.\textsuperscript{40} The average consumer, then, is not taking in a greater number of ads, but with Internet access on multiple devices, the consumer has more access points for exposure. What seems to be driving this large turn to the Internet as an information source is convenience. Constant access makes congregants believe they do not need to leave home to worship with their respective congregations.

With so much electronic inundation, Christian adherents ultimately may seek a return to simpler things, those involving direct human contact and in-person worship with real-time fellowship. Some may crave the peace and solitude of worship time to avoid worldly distractions. In Romans, Apostle Paul’s words echo to Christian worshippers that some of the conveniences of the modern age, despite the ease they bring to individual lives, may become a threat to the spiritual formation of the Church: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”\textsuperscript{41} In essence, anything that can affect one’s mind—which the absorption of information from the Internet, advertising, television, and brand flashing does—can adversely affect one’s Christian life.

Similarly, the Apostle James reminds Christians to be do-ers of the holy word, as well as deep listeners.

But be sure you live out the message and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves. For if someone merely listens to the message and does not live it out, he is like someone who gazes at his own face in a mirror. For he gazes at himself and then goes out and immediately forgets what sort of person he was. But the one who peers into the perfect law of liberty and fixes his attention there, and does not become a forgetful listener but one who lives it out – he will be

\textsuperscript{40} Daily Ad Exposures.

\textsuperscript{41} Rom. 12:2.
blessed in what he does.\textsuperscript{42}

For adherents who primarily receive sermons and worship service through streaming video online, James gives marked instruction. Reception of the holy word is not merely about listening with the human ear. It requires “hearing” with the Christian heart, which, in turn, catalyzes a believer to take Christian action. This motivation is not always easily transferred to other aspects of a believer’s life outside of a sanctuary. Once the streaming video ends, so, too, does the listening. While an online video can give inspiration in the moment, and may sustain a believer to be inspired for some time afterward, it is a challenge for some to translate that inspiration into action in their own homes, their communities and their daily lives. Spiritual formation requires the duration of both a listening heart and Christian acts of faith to be holistic and continuous. Matt Capps, teaching pastor at The Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee, reminds Christians, “we should be asking the Spirit of God to search us at our very root, deep in our souls, and reveal sin and teach us godliness.”\textsuperscript{43} Then Christians should practice what is revealed to them in the world around them. Merely listening to a video offers little to fulfill this aspect of a Christian calling.

This project, and the model of spiritual formation that derives from it, focused specifically on revitalization and Church growth issues for pastoral leaders in their contextual locality. By focusing local strategies for growing small churches on spiritual formation in the Church and in individuals, participating local churches can move their congregations into an era of Christian-hearted listening and inspire congregants to be do-ers of God’s word. Local congregants of the African-American church who are truly immersed in spiritual formation will

\textsuperscript{42} James 1:22-25.

desire to live lives as described by George Barna in *Growing True Disciples*: “Jesus’s life was about the selfless love of others—a life devoted to serving people. We should focus priority on addressing the needs of others with the same love, sensitivity, and skill demonstrated by Jesus during His ministry.”

To achieve that end, Christian disciples must arrive for worship and other spiritual disciplines willing to give up much of what they have learned to love and cherish in the world. This is the mark of living Christlike. “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he cannot be my disciple.”

Only through this kind of sacrifice, through giving of the self totally to being a do-er of the word, is a believer adequately prepared to help transform non-believers.

**Review of Literature**

This review of literature will discuss both scholarly and biblical texts on the subject of spiritual formation in the Church. Sources used for this thesis define and examine aspects of spiritual formation specifically as it relates to the individual believer first, then at the level of the larger Church. The second half of the literature review will cite biblical references used for this thesis that inform the understanding of spiritual formation. Overall, the literature establishes that this thesis is part of a larger scholarly conversation and seeks to address a faith-based issue that other scholars have sought to explore.

**Individualist Focus on Spiritual Formation**

Kenneth Boa describes the spectrum of spiritual growth and identifies spiritual formation as one among several important aspects of New Testament living. According to Boa, one key to

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spiritual formation is acknowledging spiritual growth as a journey for deepening one’s faith. In *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approached to Spiritual Formation*, Boa delineates twelve in-depth facets of spiritual formation: relational, paradigm, disciplined, devotional, nurturing, process, motivational, spirit-filled, holistic, warfare, and corporate spirituality. Boa emphasizes that everyone is unique with a distinctive temperament, which attracts a particular kind of spirituality; however, Boa believes every Christian should try every facet to eliminate the perception of a “one size fits all” ideology in Christian education. When a Christian tries every facet, only then is he or she opening the mind to a spectrum of spiritual growth.

This is relevant to spiritual formation as it gives the Church a way to view spiritual growth through an individual lens. Customarily, congregations address the need for spiritual growth to a body; however, there is nothing in this approach that is customized to accompany the unique needs of each listener. Like many biblical scholars, Boa believes spiritual development begins from infancy and continues through the final stages of life. In this sense, spiritual development is a continuous commitment to becoming complete and of sound mind within the Holy Spirit and in the manner of Jesus Christ. Boa removes addresses the tendency of the Church to give a blanket plan for spiritual development. Each adherent can develop a spiritual growth plan that gives singular access to everyone’s talents, abilities and private connection to God.

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster defines various inward and outward spiritual disciplines critical to spiritual development. These disciplines, which also have sub-categories, are characterized as outward, inward or corporate. The outward discipline of

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simplicity, for example, is offered as a means of daily living. The inward discipline of studying, according to Foster, can be both verbal and nonverbal. Verbal study involves memory and repetition; nonverbal study focuses on the dynamics of nature, which might include making friends with trees and flowers. An instance of a corporate discipline is confession, which is essential in Christian practice since it brings forgiveness when spoken to fellow Christian brothers and sisters.

When approaching spiritual formation, it is important for the individual to understand there is merit in using multi-pronged solutions to achieve spiritual growth. Just as Boa reminds readers that every believer deserves a tailored plan for spiritual development, Foster posits that a tailored plan should be layered to be the most effective.

Like Boa, Diane Leclerc and Mark A. Maddix’s focus on Christlikeness in *Spiritual Formation: A Wesleyan Paradigm.*48 The process of spiritual formation in the Wesleyan model involves becoming a transformational person who develops over a lifetime in relationship to God and community. An individual’s Christian faith life is transformed entirely with active participation within the faith community. This participation, in turn, transforms one’s character to imitate the teachings of Jesus Christ and one emerges with a new identity that no longer focuses on past hurts.

The Wesleyan perspective believes that transformative discipleship must start with life within the church walls and regular church attendance, as well as consistent involvement within one’s community, such as feeding the needy or homeless populations. Adherence to Leclerc and Maddix principles would help to reverse the trends for declining church attendance.

Additionally, because there is a primary emphasis on individual transformation, there is a greater

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likelihood that unchurched and never-churched believers would find some meaningful fulfillment in being involved with the Church.

Because the notion of an individualist approach can extend to both congregants and leaders, editor Alan Andrews collection of spiritual essays, *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, is necessary. Andrews describes the supernatural elements of spiritual formation and provides believers, wherever they may be in their walk with Christ, a practical theology to mature spiritually and shape the spiritual journey. A key emphasis the contributors in this anthology explore is an approach to healing issues of woundedness, hiddenness and Christian legalism. For many cases of would-be spiritual formation, these issues are roadblocks to spiritual growth. This text is ideal for church or individual leaders seeking change and ways to practicing discipleship. If offers a plausible rationale to those who are resistant to spiritual formation as a practice.

Adele Calhoun instructs believers on how to be intimate with Christ in *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*. Traditionally, many congregants have well-meaning desires to develop a more deeply personal relationship with God through prayer, scriptural study or evangelism, but sometimes, they do not have a valuable roadmap for following through on their desires. This can sometimes have an opposite effect by making believers more distant from God. When people have no knowledge of how to make something happen, they tend to shy away from pursuing it.

Calhoun offers explanations for sixty-two spiritual disciplines, grouped into seven themes, as a roadmap to help believers hear God’s voice and share their Christian experience.

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with others. Additionally, she is inclusive across denominations, so her practical advice is easily received as non-sectarian. The wide range of practices Calhoun proposes is a reminder that spiritual formation models have to capitalize on inclusiveness to maximize reach and avoid the occurrence of believers feeling lost.

**Communal/Corporate Focus on Spiritual Formation**

Donald Whitney’s concept of “corporate spirituality” in *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*\(^{51}\) calls on the Church to focus on transcending the human spirit in the pursuit of Jesus Christ. To achieve that end, Whitney suggests congregants who may engage in activities like corporate prayer and meditation on scriptural verses spend ten percent of their time as they did before they converted to Christianity. This would involve spending time immersed in the life situations a congregant experienced prior to his or her conversion. Whitney notes that this is not necessarily a light-hearted task. Additionally, the Whitney approach requires congregants to spend at least eighty percent of their corporate spirituality time studying the Gospels.

The unwritten suggestion that Whitney makes in this text is that a true conversion is never in danger of reversal, even when a new believer is in the environments he or she no longer frequents as a Christian. In fact, because these believers have been in these circumstances that are not parallel to Christian life, they are in an influential position to convert others. When practiced, this model is reminiscent of evangelism as a tenet of spiritual formation. Based on the premise that Whitney puts forth, congregants must be laser focused on their own spiritual development and have the right intent while practicing corporate spirituality.

\(^{51}\) Whitney, Donald S.  *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1996.
Jim Wilhoit, author of *Spiritual Formation as If the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community*,\(^5^2\) suggests the communal approach to spiritual formation, described as consistent trends or patterns of nurturing religion, has been set aside, if not neglected, in contemporary times. Some of those patterns or trends may include observing the Sabbath as a holy day when activities not connected to faith-based worship are suspended. It could also command church ministers or pastors to build close ties with congregation members and make house calls when necessary. Wilhoit believes that some of these traditions have been abandoned by modern-day Christians.

To counter that abandonment, Wilhoit offers an intentional communal approach that makes both believers and non-believers aware of the wonders of God. According to Wilhoit, this can be achieved through a specific Christlike curriculum that consists of four elements: openness and reception to the holy grace of Jesus Christ; Christians’ recognition of themselves as special and as children of God; appropriate responses to and service for others free of motive or prejudice and regardless of religious affiliation; and building a relationship with God and showing hospitality to others.

In the Wilhoit model, there is no room for Christians to nurse an idle mind. Since spiritual formation is about teaching and training, it is ideal for any spiritual formation model to include formalized learning.

**Proposed Solutions to Address the Need of Spiritual Formation**

In the book, *Practice of the Presence of God*,\(^5^3\) Brother Lawrence delineates three simple daily practices a Christian can engage to prioritize God: praising God’s holy name,

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showing Him thanks and not placing another human being before Him. Since Lawrence believes continuous prayer means conducting all of the life’s daily habits to glorify God, he teaches his followers that God stays with those who believe in Him in every moment of their day.

Being a living expression of God is a major component of being a Christian and essential to spiritual formation. It is crucial to mediate and not become distracted by the trivialities one encounters by mere virtue of being human. When a believer has a calm, steady mind that is stayed on God, he or she is more equipped to hear God’s voice. The current landscape of the world at-large is full of distractions. In many instances, believers and would-be believers allow themselves to surrender to those distractions to the extent that they do not seek real security from God. Brother Lawrence admonition to believers to “Renounce and scorn creatures to enjoy their Creator for a moment,” is a resounding call to Christians to avoid reliance on another human for spiritual development. This text highlights the need for spiritual formation approaches to encourage an individual pursuit of disciplines with the communal body as a support.

**At the level of individuals**

From the unique Thom S. Rainer church growth study, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them*, come success stories of outreach and propositions for why many unchurched will never become regular attendees. A formerly unchurched individual is defined for this study as a person who has not been in attendance inside the walls of a church for over a ten-year period. Although these individuals may, in fact, be Christians, the reason many may decide to go back to church varies from one person to the next. Rainer chose formerly unchurched individuals for his study because there seemed to be abounding myths about their motivations for leaving the church.

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For the purposes of this thesis, the researcher will review two myths in particular. The first myth that the churched often believe is that the unchurched never attend church. Some church leaders also believe that individuals who do not go to church are oblivious to biblical principles. They do, in fact, understand the concept of sin and were familiar with this reality from an earlier point in their lives. Moreover, they could have stopped attending church for reasons that are not even connected with religion, like a busy work schedule, for instance.

Rainer also explores the myth that the unchurched population is selfish and concerned only with its own needs. Rainer’s research debunks this myth and supports the fact that individuals who are unchurched and convert to being churched often became unchurched for complicated reasons.

A church should take into consideration that it must have a welcoming sense of appeal to inspire the unchurched to want return to church. In various surveys conducted among unchurched populations, a majority of respondents revealed that they feel no meaningful connection to the Church or its current leaders. Perhaps some of this is disconnection, and ultimate displacement, is heightened by the spurious myths that exist about the unchurched. An important part of spiritual formation in a modern context must involve eradicating these myths among current believers.

The term “disciple” is sometimes used loosely in the context of the Church to refer to individuals who make up the congregation. Dave Earley and Rod Dempsey, *Disciple Making Is... How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*, reframe the reference to disciples and cast discipleship through the lens of The Great Commission. They move beyond merely defining what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The two examine

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how Jesus himself created disciples. Church leaders who desire to make discipleship a cornerstone of spiritual formation have a practical guide in the Earley and Dempsey text, with liberal use of scriptural passages, discipleship principles and methodologies. This work brings structure to spiritual formation models to ensure discipleship as a discipline is firmly based on biblical guidance.

**At the level of churches**

In *There Is No I In Church: Moving Beyond Inidividual Spirituality to Experience God's Power in the Church*, Keith Drury submits that corporate spiritual practices have been neglected and personal needs consistently nurtured. Drury’s theory is that Christians need to be in the midst of one another more than they currently are. Learning about the wonders of God and Christianity overall was never meant to be a one-man practice totally.

According to Drury, the concept of individualism, or thinking in terms of one’s own needs, is what drives a person into sin. Drury does not believe individualism is aligned with corporate spiritual practice. Holy spiritual growth cannot be accomplished in some cases when Christians have an individualistic mindset. Corporate spiritual practices, which Drury calls Koinonia collectively, are about sanctifying the church as a whole. Drury believes that the most appropriate means of strengthening or nurturing that practice is by being inside of a church home that relies tremendously on prayer during moments of corporate worship. Drury also suggests the Church, whose primary goal is to become corporately powerful, record the daily amount of time it spends on corporate prayer.

Although the concept of individualism cannot be dismissed as a tenet of the model that will come out of this survey findings, the researcher intends to approach the concept with

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balance. Avoiding the concept of individualism in the Church holds the unfavorable possibility of continuing the trend of falling membership. Individualism has not led directly to sin in every case. It has been cited as a major reason the unchurched leave a formal congregation in the first place. However, Drury’s concepts are strongly applicable to corporate practice and can be used to inform the corporate aspects of this model.

Over time, the church has developed formulaic approaches to focus on its growth. Missionary work has long been considered a sufficient measure of the Church’s reach. In some cases, this kind of work to convert souls has required traveling to foreign soil and working and living with a full devotion to spreading the word of God to whomever would listen. Despite the popularity of this approach, and the willingness of church leaders to recommend and support it, less formulaic solutions will require envisioning the meaning of growth in different terms. Growth is not merely about how many people the Church can touch with its messages; it is about how many become sustained believers.

Conversely, in Look Back, Leap Forward: Building your Church on the Values of the Past,57 Gary McIntosh proposes the solutions the Church has used are age-old traditions that have always guided its growth. He suggests instead a more biblical approach that holds the values that are hinted at in formulaic approaches. Relying on more biblical values offers effective instruction for re-envisioning the Church in the twenty-first century. For example, McIntosh reminds believers that Jesus Christ walked the earth as a sociable being, and that God wants His children to be sociable as well in order to bring His message to others and offer guidance. The modern spiritual formation model must have a viable social component. Social currency is a major asset in the pursuit of spiritual growth. It allows believers to witness to

others, and it allows others to remain receptive to the ways of Jesus Christ. Although the model presented in this thesis will focus on more innovative approaches, the conventional way of being sociable that McIntosh explores has endless contemporary value for those who live in an electronic age.

In the book, *Church of Irresistible Influence*, Lewis and Wilkins suggest that the only way churches will have the ability to build genuine bridges with people is by showing love the exact way that Jesus Christ did when he walked the earth. There is a chasm that exists between communities where churches are located and the actual Church. Lewis and Wilkins suggest using the power of technology on social media and developing a church website as two means of building bridges in modern times. More importantly, the two suggest that the Church must take initiative to ensure messages of the Gospel are clear and culturally relevant to the targeted demographic. To meet this challenge, some churches have used surveys to understand the opinions of individuals within the community.

The Lewis and Wilkins study offers proof that the survey as a tool of inquiry can be helpful in comprehending the needs and wants of people outside of the church walls. They suggest that after Church leaders have gained insights from surveying people in the immediate community, those leaders can engage ultimate bridge building by mimicking the life of Jesus Christ in their respective community. This would require leaders and members to be unbiased and non-judgmental toward their local unchurched populations and engage in effective community ministry. Such an approach would eliminate any gestures of indifference or hostility towards individuals not currently connected with the Church. Spiritual formation models need a suspension of judgment in order to foster exchanges that are meaningful and authentic.

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Christlike behavior opens the door to many new spiritual growth opportunities and enables congregations to become churches of irresistible influence.

In the book, *New Conversion: Why We ’Become Christian’ Differently Today,* Gordon T. Smith suggests that evangelicals and spiritual directors are experiencing a shift in the character of religious experience. Rather than focusing on the afterlife, as evangelicals conventionally have done throughout time, modern evangelicals must have a more profound appreciation for the social, financial, and environmental implications of transformation. In current times, evangelicals must help their communities pursue peace and justice and identify with the poor and disregarded.

According to Gordon, there are seven elements essential for appropriate conversions and spiritual transformation, which he defines as the process of being baptized in holy water by an ordained minister, Spirit infilling and the repentance of sins. The seven elements required for conversions are: belief, trust and forgiveness, commitment, repentance, gifts of the Spirit, baptism and the Christian community.

Smith’s text is instructive for spiritual formation models, as it gives a theology of conversion and a measuring stick for believers to recognize when their gifts and works have helped to transform the lives of non-believers. As much as it advises believers on spiritual guidance, it also helps believers to continually reassess their journeys and realign themselves to give guidance. The most significant value Smith’s work brings to the discussion of spiritual formation is helping believers understand that the process of transformation is a pilgrimage. On

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that pilgrimage, believers meet other pilgrims who become their spiritual companions helping them stay attentive to God’s presence in their lives.

If churches implement the suggestions of Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, the transformations that need to occur would be organic. Thru a model called Life Transformation Groups leaders are built holistic and organically to face certain change with absolute truths of the gospel itself to transform and be changed from inside. Using tangible examples of real churches that have undergone transformations, they create a model for churches to unleash movements within the church not manufactured by any organized agenda, but that, by their very existence, urge spiritual formation. Among Cole and Helfer’s recommendations are a practical approach for grandparenting movements, making desired change go viral among the congregation and in the community, and a guide for measuring church body success based on its movements.

The Cole and Helfer approach works for the local African-American Church because it offers a practical approach that eases congregations into change. The team applies natural, holistic life principles to church operations, so leaders who might otherwise be resistant stay in the realm of their familiar. This is a sound application, as it allows leadership to approach spiritual formation without blame components for initiatives that have not been successful or lasting.

These solutions are part of a discourse that does not always necessarily include the unchurched. Church leaders often feel their biggest obligation is to those who have converted to Christian lifestyles and are open to learning and maturing in those lifestyles. Edward H. Hammett confronts the reality of churches’ obligations to the unchurched in Reframing Spiritual Formation: Discipleship in an Unchurched Culture. Because he gives a clear, unblinking

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survey of the current state of the world community, those who encounter this text are forced to understand the weight of their Christian commitments in their own communities. In the spirit of this finding, religious leaders must be immersed in their respective communities without fear.

The true role of discipleship, and of spiritual formation, is to find opportunities for transformation, and those opportunities do not happen only inside the doors of the Church.

**Biblical Review**

The latter portion of the Book of Hebrews, starting from Chapter 10, reminds believers that faith in Jesus Christ is the most profound work in which a Christian can engage as a source of salvation. Specifically, Heb. 10:25 warns against forsaking Christian assembly, as some of the unchurched, and the churched who place other activities above assembly as a priority, tend to do.

The nature of spiritual formation requires committing to assembly as a means of transformation. Heb. 12:5-11 turns its attention to preparing Christians for discipline. The author of this book, attributed often as an anonymous writer but believed to be either Paul or Barnabas, compares the discipline of God to the discipline that a child receives from his or her father. Although a literal translation of this scripture might imply punishment for straying from the spiritual path, its larger implication is to see the process of spiritual formation as a path of spiritual growth filled with opportunities for guidance from God.

The Book of Matthew is a narrative that uses narrative history, lineage and prophesies to show that Jesus Christ is indeed the messiah. For this thesis, and for the reason that believers who willingly enter spiritual formation as a mean to remain Christlike, the following verses considered examines the ministry of Jesus Christ as a man who walked on Earth, as well as his death and resurrection. There are enlightened passages in this book, specifically in Matt. 28:18-20 that instruct Christians to be disciples. Matt. 22:35-40 reminds believers of the two greatest
commandments, that of loving God completely and that of loving neighbors. Matt: 5:13-14 reminds believers that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. These behaviors are exemplary and Christlike. They are reminders to those in spiritual formation to be the change they wish to see in the world. Mahatma Ghandi’s words were deeply perceptive of this aspect of spiritual formation: “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him.”

In the Book of Romans, the Apostle Paul tells believers how to build their faith in ways that serve God effectively. A letter like this would be a valid way to trigger the kind of transformation required in spiritual formation. Paul provides a theological foundation for committing to spiritual formation in this epistle. He answers important questions about salvation, spiritual growth and the righteousness of God. One of the most important revelations by Apostle Paul in Romans is the notion that good deeds alone will not build or repair a relationship with God. Faith in the work of Jesus Christ—and in being Christlike—has to be paired with those good deeds. In Rom. 12:2 and Rom. 5:5, Apostle Paul warns believers not to conform to the world, but renew their minds for transformation. He opens the epistle by telling them of his own journey from being a slave to becoming an apostle of Jesus Christ. This is an example of what is possible for the soul in spiritual formation. Just as God sent Jesus as His Son into the world, Jesus sends believers into the world to transform souls and lives.  

The book of Acts shows the deeds of the Apostles when engaged and inspired by The Holy Spirit. It is a sequel to the Book of Luke and is seminal to spiritual formation work because it

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62 John 16:8; 20:21; 17:18.
tells of the sermons and evangelical work that actually converted souls to Jesus Christ. Acts 2:32-33 and Acts 2:38 remind believers of what they have inherited as a result of Jesus sitting on the right hand of God and what is possible through repentance. Acts 10:43 reinforces the rewards of believing by reiterating that this is the way to be forgiven for sin. Becoming a believer is a fundamental first step in taking the journey of spiritual formation. Without this belief in the work of Jesus Christ and the redemption he offers as the Son of God, spiritual growth, and the myriad transformations that happen as a result of that growth, are not possible.

Although the Book of Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, it contains the most narrative about miracles. In fact, twenty-seven miracles appear in this book, which relates the healing, teachings, and compassionate acts of Jesus Christ in parables. The fact that they are parables does not diminish their truth or instruction. Though Mark ensured there was a record of Jesus’ miraculous deeds, the Book of Luke was written so that believers could know the facts about the life of Jesus Christ.63 In Chapter 16:15, Mark set the scale and consequences for believing in the work of Jesus Christ, work that includes miracles as a form of evidence in his power as a Savior. He admonishes non-believers about their certain condemnation.

The importance of this literature lies mostly in the fact the Gospel of Mark emphasizes the need for believers to closely guard what grows inside of them: “There is nothing outside of a person that can defile him by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles him.”64 Nothing can be more powerful than knowledge that what is within a person determines what comes out of him and his capacity to transform the world around him. Those who live the reverse cannot be spiritually transformed. James 1:22 gives practical Christian insight as well, when the text tells Christians to live the message of Jesus, of forgiveness, of

64 Mark 7:15.
salvation and redemption that is always planted within them. Colossians continues this message that the seeds within believers bear fruit and grow.\textsuperscript{65}

It is likely that in the course of pursuing spiritual formation, believers will encounter other non-conformers who not only claim no belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ, but also spread teachings that stand in stark opposition to the Gospel. The Apostle Paul’s proclamations in 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians make the case for believers to stand their ground, and by doing so, stand with Jesus Christ. In 2 Cor. 6:1, the Apostle Paul urges fellow-workers not to receive the grace of God in vain. In spiritual formation, believers are not to be receptive to words or acts that do not glorify God. In fact, everything that a believer does, even eating and drinking with non-believers\textsuperscript{66}, is for the glory of God.

The Book of Titus offers guidance to religious leaders to steer their congregants toward spiritual formation. Paul wrote these instructions to Titus, a Greek believer, to help him guide churches on the island of Crete. Many of his lessons are still relevant for contemporary leaders in the local African-American Church. He reminds Titus, “For the overseer must be blameless as one entrusted with God’s work, not arrogant, not prone to anger, not a drunkard, not violent, not greedy for gain. Instead he must be hospitable, devoted to what is good, sensible, upright, devout, and self-controlled.”\textsuperscript{67} These words, written to a church that sought to thrives ages ago, highlight many of the ways that a pastor as a leader can be fallible and succumb to behaviors that are not Christlike. Arrogance, anger, violence, drunkenness, and greed are behaviors that impede the progress of spiritual formation. Pastors who instruct others for spiritual growth should always be devout and exercise self-control. Likewise, Paul also

\textsuperscript{65} Col. 3:1; 3:5-8; 3:11.
\textsuperscript{66} 1 Cor. 10:31.
\textsuperscript{67} Titus 1:7-8.
instructed Timothy for building the church in Ephesus, telling him to reject the myths of the Godless and gullible and devote himself to Godliness.\textsuperscript{68}

If one examines the breaking events of the global community, one must accept that the current state of the world extends suffering and promotes persecution. The state of North Carolina has added to this state and has slowly earned a national reputation for its attempts to legalize persecution.\textsuperscript{69} Most recently, the state has found itself accused of strategic bias in an attempt to disenfranchise African-American, Latino, elderly, undocumented and low-income voters.\textsuperscript{70}

In a similar climate, the Apostle Paul extended an opportunity to suffering, disenfranchised and persecuted Christians to find personal salvation and holiness through transformation. He reminds suffering Christians that the time they spend on Earth is temporary, and they should see God as the impartial judge of their work here on Earth.\textsuperscript{71} The Apostle Paul also urges Christians to practice excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, Godliness, brotherly affection and unselfish love.\textsuperscript{72} In each of these pursuits is a goal for spiritual formation. Each is a part of Jesus Christ’s ministry and facilitate believers living a Christlike existence.

The Apostle Paul offers further encouragement for believers to walk in spiritual formation in Eph. 4:11-13 by assuming the special role that God has designed for each believer.

\textsuperscript{68} 1 Tim. 4:7-8.


\textsuperscript{71} 1 Peter 1:17.

\textsuperscript{72} 2 Peter 1:4-7.
Some have gifts as prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers, and believers should immerse themselves in those gifts in order to mature spiritually in Christ. Spiritual formation requires one to be a new creature, to avoid following a hardened heart and leave behind former ways of the world. It requires spiritual leaders to guard God’s words, as King Solomon reminds in the Book of Proverbs, as if they are a source of life, because they are.

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73 Eph. 4:11-13.
74 Eph. 4:20-24.
75 Prov. 4:20-24.
CHAPTER 2
SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOUNDATION

Colossians 3:5-16 helps to establish a biblical grounding for this thesis. Writing one of his many letters while imprisoned, Apostle Paul offers instruction for how to live a life in Christ, giving up earthly things, teaching one another and using love as a tool for unity. This is a true basis for spiritual formation, both a personal and church body focus on things that are Christlike. After a believer is baptized buried and raised with Christ, his congregational life is a daily practice of setting his heart on the things which glorify God. He and the church where he worships are motivated by acts of Christ; the natural man in him is dead, and the spiritual man is made alive. Because he is transformed, he no longer cares about the world the way he did before his salvation. He “used to live this way,” but has learned to shed some old behaviors.

Before coming to Christ, a believer’s lifestyle is characterized by sin. Apostle Paul groups that sin into two clusters. There is the list of things that God wants us to put a death to: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed (idolatry). Secondly, Paul speaks of putting off social sins: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. If one is human, he is susceptible to these acts of sin. Believers and non-believers alike often try to rationalize and justify these sins, but they dishonor one’s commitment to being Christlike and disrupt the progress of spiritual formation. The difference between believers and non-believers is the grace of God manifested through the blood of Jesus. Believers repent, or... face chastisement.

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1 Col. 3:1.
2 I Cor. 10:31.
3 I Cor. 10:31.
4 Col. 3:5.
5 Col. 3:8.
6 Heb. 12:5-11.
Biblical Basis

Paul’s appeal in Colossians 3:10-17 is for believers to live as new people in Christ. He reminds his readers that they have to account for every moment of their lives that they are “sons of disobedience”\(^7\) and emphasizes that believers no longer live among those who have no intention of accounting or repenting.\(^8\) The believer has a vital union with Christ and lives as a regenerated self-united with Christ. That renewal is authentic for all who are born-again baptized believers because “Christ is all, and in all.”\(^9\) Spiritual formation requires that believers acknowledge this truth as a means of Christian devoutness and as a path to spiritual maturity.

To better understand spiritual formation, it is important to know how the Church as a body, and its people as individuals working within that body, should work. As Apostle Paul reveals in II Corinthians, everyone who becomes a new creature in Christ also becomes “God’s fellow-worker.”\(^10\)

These fellow-workers assist God in His supernatural work under the guidance of an “overseer” (church leader or bishop) who is also directly “entrusted with God’s work.”\(^11\) The true nature and purpose of the Church is encapsulated and revealed in these two verses. The Church is created to minister to God through worship, to believers by nurturing them and to the world through evangelism and with mercy. The church is the vehicle through which God invites his “fellow-workers” to build with (and for) Him. Specifically, the church is tasked with the

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\(^7\) Col. 3:6.
\(^8\) Col. 3:7.
\(^9\) Col. 3:11.
\(^10\) II Cor. 6:1.
\(^11\) Titus 1:7.
spiritual formation of congregants, and all of God’s followers will be judged according to the quality of their work in spiritually forming his Church.\textsuperscript{12}

Spiritual formation for individual believers is directly connected to the gifts that The Holy Spirit distributes among “fellow-workers” to participate in the life of the Church and build it up.\textsuperscript{13} In many congregations, members foster spiritual formation by practicing spiritual disciplines that keep them focused and in God’s presence. These disciplines are daily habits that include Bible study, prayer, praise and worship, and fellowshipping with other believers. Through these physical habits, believers are trained to be godly, which “has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.\textsuperscript{14}

Engaging constantly in disciplines, both on an individual and organizational level–can keep church members anchored to their respective congregations in a way that is spiritually fulfilling. They are practicing a faith that is continually evolving. Without it, many members likely feel merely tethered to a congregation out of long-term habit rather than feeling anchored because of a committed spiritual growth experience.

Despite the perennial importance of God’s work in the world, some twenty-first century congregations fail when it comes to spiritual formation. When a congregation prays and studies God’s word, its aim should be focused on looking to God to shape the practice of spiritual disciplines for individual members and for the church as a whole. This prepares disciples to do His will and include that spiritual aspect in every facet of their ministries and daily lives. For the congregation that feels disconnected from the church, and subsequently feels a void in spiritual formation, there is little, if any, motivation to stay the course. Their daily lives become focused

\textsuperscript{12} 1 Pet. 1:17.
\textsuperscript{13} Eph. 4:11-13.
\textsuperscript{14} I Tim. 4:7-8.
on earthly things to the extent that most concepts connected to God and the Church fade. They no longer “throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life…[and] let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. [They do not] Put on your new nature, created to be like God–truly righteous and holy.”

They no longer have the goal of being more Christlike each day. They form new allegiances for their lives outside of the Church and rarely, if ever, seek spiritual transformation.

This present thesis tincture on renewal is situated in a present requirement for the purposeful headway of the Church, particularly in its main goal and operations that specifically influence the nature of membership. However, revitalization is heavily dependent on the Church’s relationship with its members and its local community. It depends, too, on individual transformation, which does not always occur for congregants who show up faithfully to participate in the rituals set forth by the Church. The best local example of this kind of shortcoming, which undermines revitalization, lies in the lifelong senior congregant who cannot give any reliable measure of his own spiritual growth from the moment he first became a congregant to the present. He shows up to open the church, set up the sanctuary for worship and secure the church’s grounds when worship is over. At eighty, he has been the appointed person to deliver on this task for the last fifty years; however, when asked about how he has experienced personal growth from one year to the next over the course of his membership, he is at a loss for a definitive answer.

After sitting in silence for at least forty seconds after an interviewer asks the question, he says, “I trust God, and over the years, I just grew from that.”

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17 Ibid.
This is neither an uncommon nor unfamiliar response among faithful congregants. Most
do not have a clear understanding of how to define spiritual growth and an even more vague
sense of how to measure it.18 When transformation takes root in the believer’s life, there is a
continual renewal and constant spiritual growth guided by the wisdom of Christ. This constant
cycle helps the believer ascend to a level of spiritual maturity that strengthens and characterizes
his Christlike image. He becomes one of God’s chosen ones and, as described in Colossians
3:12-14, lives with the holy attributes expected of believers:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of
compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one
another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just
as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things, a believer
should put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Congregants who have accepted and committed their lives to deeper spiritual formation
use love to unite with other believers who practice spiritual formation. They also use this love to
appeal to those who do not yet know God in this way and have not learned to be Christlike. In
Colossians 3: 15-17, Apostle Paul describes the demeanor of those who walk in spiritual
formation:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts and be thankful. Let the word of Christ
richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another
in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts
to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Peaceful Christlike hearts have no room for the bitterness of anger or its aftermath.
Congregants who have reached this state surrender to an inner peace that governs awareness,
individual free will, feelings and morality. The word of God teaches congregants infinite
wisdom as believers. It cautions and encourages us always to place a melody of love in the

2015). Hereafter referred to as Spiritual Maturity.
heart, which will lead every intent or gesture when embracing others. The passion that is the foundation for service is clear in Colossians 3:17. Everything a believer does should be done with gratitude and in the name of God. Within the church, it is necessary to remember to whom one belong, whom one serve and because of whom one exist.

This position also extends to the church body as a whole. Churches that are truly committed to spiritual formation engage its principles in every aspect of their existence. Peace governs the manner in which the corporate business of the Church is conducted. It shapes the way the church embraces newcomers and visitors and how it chooses its leaders. It decides how dilemmas and conflicts are resolved, how collected funds are distributed to perform their best “good” and how ministries are organized to do the work of God.

The Core of Spiritual Formation

At the core of spiritual formation is a drive to live a pure life centered on God in order to influence others to live equally pure lives. Believers who are committed to the spiritual disciplines required for formation harbor the power to transform the lives of others. They are encouraged to stow God’s words of wisdom “in the midst of your heart,” because “they are life to those who find them, and health to all their body.”19 Believers are to “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flows the springs of life.”20 They surround themselves with like-minded believers and avoid the things that defile man: sexual immorality, thefts, murders, and adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness.”21 As one walks in spiritual formation, these things that are not Christlike are also no longer natural. Spiritual formation and individual congregant transformation within the

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20 Prov. 4:23.
21 Mark 7:15; 20-23.
body of Christ, then, is about displaying Christ’s deeds through commissioning of Christ and the power of The Holy Spirit in such a manner it becomes a natural manifestation:

Now, since you have become partakers of the divine nature, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.  

Love is also at the heart of spiritual formation, and believers express that love without shame “because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” If congregations honestly assessed this and additional Bible verses measured against their own church missions, they would discover the need to organize both a corporate effort and foster individual effort in practicing spiritual formation. Each discipline in which a congregant engages is an intent toward moral excellence. It drives, knowledge of self and God, and subsequently makes self-control, perseverance, Godliness, kindness and love inevitable.

The need to make a clear distinction between individual and corporate spiritual formation has not been a prevalent theme in the African-American Christian Church; however, it is key for reaching the unchurched and the never churched, as most have expressed a need to feel individual fulfillment in their chosen places of worship. In many cases, the spiritual offer in the African-American Church has leaned more often than not toward corporate spiritual formation, when a church’s leaders have considered spiritual formation at all. In order to move beyond long-term existing traditions, which are grounded in the idea that spiritual growth is a pursuit of the congregation as a whole, the church must become willing to break down its own historic barriers to reach individuals in its community.

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22 II Peter 1:4-7.
23 Rom. 5:5.
Some of that breakdown has to start with leaders being honest about what they do not know when it comes to spiritual growth. They must be willing to be students of the disciplines themselves and see the disciplines with fresh eyes in order to be properly prepared to lead others in spiritual formation practices. While this will require more church leaders to call on The Holy Spirit as counselor, motivator and light down dark paths and comforter, it will also require an inordinate amount of humility to make the best choices for members while staying obedient to God.

It will also require church leaders and pastors to commit to being on the journey toward spiritual formation themselves. Many leaders are unwilling to admit that they are still growing and learning. They may feel this admission diminishes their power and standing among congregants. The model of service in the African-American Church is an archetype is obsolete for the current times, and leaders who continue to leverage this model will likely continue to see their memberships dwindling. Serving as a leader in the Church does not mean that one has arrived at some ultimate destination and will remain in that position for the rest of his earthly life without any further growth. It means one has mastered spiritual discipline well enough to be open to expansive growth and maturity. Leaders are teachers and guides for congregants, but those roles are only as effective and fulfilling as the leaders’ willingness to be students, as well. Because spiritual formation offers one the opportunity for continuous growth and self-learning, it is one of the best approaches to living a life with God as the source of all things.

Within the context of modernity in the twenty-first century, change is unequivocally necessary due to increasing competition from Eastern religions and other non-traditional religious sects combined with the nascent forces of modernism and postmodernism that have
slowly squeezed out Christianity. Everything to which an individual, congregation, community, state and nation can pledge allegiance is now multinational. Increasing self-employment, a rise in independent voters, a declining trust in national-level institutions has helped drive a general thirst for renewal. More would-be congregants have a strong desire to believe in things that are either extremely local or international. Herein lies an opportunity for spiritual formation to take its root in the African-American Christian Church by securing more local participation. Believers may take solace in what is local and works for their own spiritual maturation.

The Development of Spiritual Formation

This window of opportunity, however, is met with a unique challenge. Although there is more openness to localized solutions, the Church as a whole struggles on a multinational level. The influence of the Church as a central institution has diminished around the globe because the lean toward both secularization and modernization have increasingly led to the ostracism of Christianity as a universal religion. A survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in 2008 concluded that the majority of American citizens approach religion from a non-dogmatic point of view because they do not believe that they need to follow institutionalized religion in order to attain salvation. This general pulling away from conventional doctrine

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25 Ibid.


indicates how diverse religious practices, perceptions, and affiliations have become in modern times.

There is a learning opportunity for the local African-American Christian Church in the unveiling of these religious mores. Understanding the true current state of Christian ministry and evangelism could give rise to a new local design for evangelistic ministry using support from secondary literature, scriptural evidence and survey analysis. The church remains in the eyes of many an outdated institution and remnant of an antiquated past that has failed to successfully navigate the shifting social, cultural, and political contexts through both modern and postmodern worldviews. \(^{28}\) The Christian church seems to have lost its socio-cultural currency, which explains why a majority of youth opt “to define their [own] spiritual journey.” \(^{29}\) In an attempt to outpace such trends, many church leaders are constantly devising innovative ways to transform the church in an increasingly diverse, post-Christian world. These leaders look to the Gospel and scriptural precepts to justify church-sponsored evangelistic efforts aimed at fomenting religious fervor among the spiritually ambivalent.

Some churches have found that direct personal evangelism has greatly contributed to and catalyzed the transformation of the lives of the so-called “unchurched.” \(^{30}\) This approach is more commonly known in religious circles as friendship evangelism, a tactic used to forge meaningful relationships and friendships between non-believers and proselytizers, who seek to convince non-believers to become proselytizers themselves. \(^{31}\) Friendship evangelism has found its success largely because many people who self-identify as “unchurched” are still spiritual and see


\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Thom S. Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched and Proven Ways to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), 44.

\(^{31}\) McQuerry, "Some Terms of Evangelical Christianity," 150.
themselves as believers. In fact, the Landscape Survey conducted in 2008 unveils the fact that individuals who remain religiously unaffiliated still believe in a higher power or the power of the divine; however, they have not felt personally connected to any affiliation or religious following because of the perceived corruption, greed, and self-interest displayed by many leaders who are viewed as sacrosanct in the Christian church. This further underscores why direct evangelism is needed to design a ministry that caters and responds to twenty-first century exigencies.

When believers follow the desires of their fondness, churches are often misguided and lead down the wrong path. In the book, *Spiritual Discipline and Christian Leadership*, Michael Smith examines the present challenges of the spiritual formation process facing the church. Smith writes:

> Leaders can get off the right pathway and begin to neglect the things that keep them from going in the right direction. This can be due to spiritual warfare, temptations, distractions, or simply disobedience. There are always things and issues seeking to pull a leader away from their God ordained pathway. Therefore, a leader must have a determined desire and conscious awareness to practice spiritual disciplines intentionally in order to stay on the right pathway.

Therefore, taking after God longings will guide and lead the congregation to a much brighter and noble way. God wants for all who believe in Him and to be His followers. Luke 9: 23-24, Jesus calls and commissions the disciples by saying, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.” Therefore, scripturally a call to spiritual formation is much needed amongst twenty-first-century exigencies. The local church has an opportunity to embrace and come to know what it takes to be a follower of Christ.

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In Luke 9, Christ engaged His supporters in the work of teaching and preaching the gospel. The time was near that He would no longer be with these disciples. He prepared and equipped them to help spread the gospel. How the local church develops and prepare disciples is essential for maintaining faithfulness and holding a genuine connection with God and His will. Also, being faithful to the instructional guidance of the Holy Spirit while focusing on being Christ-like, believers becomes shaped into being the people God needs and accomplishing His will. In doing so, believers are required to follow Him where His Spirit leads and guides. The key to this scriptural lesson was their faithfulness.

The local church must be faithful in following the instructions of His Holy Spirit as to what we should do, how and where we should do His mission. The local church must maintain a dynamic part in the profound development of spiritual formation. In Revelation 2:10 whereas it states, “Be faithful until death for the crown of life. The one who has an ear had better hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The second death will in no way harm the one who conquers.”

During Christ’s ministry in Galilee, many people only came to hear Jesus. His disciples suffered significantly over their confidence and by and large met brutal passing’s because of their striking witness. As a follower of Jesus, there will be rejection, just as the Lord was rejected, because of the believer’s faithfulness to Christ. In the Gospel, per John 15: 18-21, persecution for Christ’s sake brings forth rejoicing to the followers of Christ when it instructed:

On the off chance that the world abhors you, know that it loathed me first. If you had a place in the world, the world would love you as its own. Nonetheless, because you do not have a place in the world, however, I picked you out of the world, for this reason, the world hates you. Remember what I told you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they would also persecute you. If they obeyed my word, they would obey yours too. Be that as it may, they will do every one of these things to you because of my name since they do not know about the person who sent me.
It may seem at times that all one’s efforts seem wasted. Despite the rejection, one will grow in kindness and faith, in grace and the knowledge of Christ. Luke 18:27 says, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.”

As a follower of Christ, individual will experience newness and excitement. One must, however, take off the old and put on the new. One must be willing to transform our lively hood to a call of servanthood. This newness is the will of loving to serve. Christ taught his disciples to love one another and even to love their enemies. Christ’s lifestyle was that of service. Just as Christ, as a follower one shall provide service to all. The church must stand on God’s word, rest on His promise, walk in a Godly way, and strive to help the lost. Being a servant requires a life of devoting our time and abilities to serve people. Christ’s life was about the sacrificial love of others an existence committed to peopling. It is important for the church to fixate its need on tending to the necessities of other with a comparable respect, affectability, and ability exhibited by Jesus amid His service.

A way of serving the Lord is loving Him and loving people. Also, following the Lord is serving. Johns 12:26 share, “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” Giving of self in service to others through ministry, Christ will help the church, as well as individuals, find excitement and newness in life for which they are searching. Through faithfulness despite any rejection, Christ recognizes the service of his followers. As a follower of Christ, He equips and inspire His disciples to teach His word. On the off chance that we do what the Lord needs us to do, we can make certain He will give us the strength and capacity.

Biblically, Christ calls upon those of great faith to serve as His disciple. His disciples are urged to give of themselves totally in doing so. As His disciple’s, the church or individual
cannot be distracted with the wickedness of the world or caught up in pride. Luke 14:33 says, "Similarly, any of you who does not surrender all he can't be my disciple." Disciples of Christ gain life by living the kind of life they are advocating other should live. A disciple is a Christian who has a Christ-like faith. As disciple’s must strive to be whole and a capable follower of Jesus the Christ. A disciple is one who lives the spiritual lifestyle, which exemplifies Christ teaching. Disciples should be a submitted, proficient, genuine laborer conferring worship, imparting adoration and energy into the individuals who are non-devotees.
CHAPTER 3
SURVEY FINDINGS

The challenge of conducting a survey lies in the nature of the survey itself. Because they are designed to collect data from a single point in time, it is difficult to measure change over a period of time. The data collected represents information from a specific moment, and that data is subject to change shortly after the survey is completed. Additionally, there is no specific way to measure whether the questions contained in the survey accurately reflect the causes and effects of participating churches’ behaviors on spiritual formation.

As a research tool, the survey provided the most timely and cost-effective method for reaching local African-American church leaders. It is relatively easy to administer in both online and paper formats. Its remote access feature removes the survey’s conventional dependence on the researcher being physically present in all geographical areas where the survey is conducted. It also provides the researcher with a diverse range of question options to accommodate various social mores, response hesitations, and attitudes about surveys. For example, the same question could be posed with several different wording approaches to ensure different demographic types have equal emotional access to questioning. There has been no clear, effective way to accommodate for survey shortcomings; however, the survey revealed as much about the participants as it might have revealed about spiritual formation locally.

General Discoveries Based on Leader Response to Surveys

Attitudes toward surveys affect both the quality and quantity of data collected locally. It determines the level of honesty and the timeliness of survey completion. A Steven Rogelberg study categorized survey attitudes as either survey enjoyment, or feelings participants have about
the act of completing surveys, or survey value, meaning perceptions of how much value the survey research will have after completion.\(^1\) This investigation found that local participants harbor limited survey enjoyment and heightened survey value.

While 25 local respondents out of 100 requested completed the survey, the researcher found that those who completed the survey did so after two to four additional reminders or a prodding to submit responses. The initial 100 requests were sent via electronic mail, and 64 percent, or sixty-four respondents, indicated a willingness to take the survey. Of the sixty-four respondents, nineteen (30 percent) responded electronically with questions regarding how the information would be used. Thirty-three (52 percent) of respondents wanted to know if their names or church affiliations would be connected in any way to the survey, even after the initial email emphasized anonymity. Fifteen (23 percent) of the sixty-four initial respondents said they did not know if they would have time to complete the survey, but would try. They cited higher priorities for competing church, work or personal tasks.

The survey was designed to give participants a full month to respond to questions posed about spiritual formation. Within one week of the deadline, only three respondents had completed and submitted the survey. The researcher made personal phone calls and face-to-face requests to secure additional response. The remaining twenty-three respondents, including the one respondent who requested his survey be completed by an interviewer, all submitted responses within the final two days of the survey deadline. The survey contains 35 questions with a variety of response types including multiple choice (four), essay (seven) and rating (twenty-three). Essay questions allow respondents to personalize their responses about their length of time, roles, and experience in the church or to elaborate on rating questions without revealing any identifying information.

Although it could be plausibly reasoned that the real task of balancing church, work and personal life is a weighted factor in completing surveys, the length of time taken by respondents to answer questions and submit surveys and the initial questions encountered by the researcher at the onset of the survey indicate a more general challenge to the survey tool as a whole. Citing Roger Tourangeau’s social information processing and survey methodology theories for his study, Rogelberg notes that individuals taking surveys undergo four stages of processing information when they respond to survey questions: question interpretation, retrieving relevant information, processing that retrieved information and responding to the question. The amount of care that survey respondents invest across these four processing areas determines the quality of the data when a survey is used. Respondents invest in surveys based on their individual personality traits, ability to quickly interpret questions and attitudes toward surveys in general.

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2 Survey Attitudes.
3 Ibid.
The quality of data from local studies may have encompassed all of these factors. Of the twenty-five respondents, only fourteen (56 percent) answered all survey questions and only nine (36 percent) elaborated with specific details about their church’s involvement in spiritual formation. To counter future hesitations this particular group of respondents may have in future surveys, the researcher “closed the loop,” or followed up with respondents to inform them about trends in the survey results. Twenty-three of the twenty-five responded acknowledged receipt of this information and expressed gratitude for the follow-up. This would seem to suggest that survey value is a high priority among local survey takers.

Perhaps some of the perceived hesitation toward surveys comes from a much broader challenge within the Church at-large. Patricia Lotich with Smart Church Management suggests that Christians like to avoid conflict because they want to be seen as kind. This avoidance of disagreement can lead to unresolved issues in the church body and member defection, which in turn counters the move toward spiritual formation for both churches and individuals. Many congregants see disagreement as a struggle rather than a gift that presents itself as an opportunity to grow and transform. Church bodies and religious leaders, too, miss this opportunity for growth when they do not “check in” with their congregants to measure how well they are meeting congregant needs. Consistent follow-up might boost the retention of members who leave the Church because they feel no real, meaningful connection. The national declining membership trend is a clear indication that both Church leaders and congregants should collaborate on a fresh direction. Both should be willing to risk short-term disagreement to arrive

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
and long-term solutions that benefit individual spiritual growth, individual church missions and The Great Commission.

It is important for the local Church and Christian leaders to prioritize and engage in spiritual formation. As A.C. Snow posits in a recurring *News and Observer* column, the unwillingness of the local church and Christian adherents to engage in disagreement may be based on the social mores that come with being located in a Southern geography. Snow posits, “There's no doubt but what Southern religion has a distinct flavor, more emotional, and, as skeptics argue, more irrational. It is deeply rooted in unquestioning faith and the power of prayer.”³⁸ This notion of unquestioning faith transfers itself to the idea of questioning Church leaders. They are considered called by God, and some congregants feel uneasy raising concerns about their own spiritual growth and fulfillment in the face of their leaders’ sacred callings. This socio-religious more and the stigmas attached to those who defy it impede the progress of spiritual formation.

The researcher acknowledges that perhaps there was some hesitation about the design of the current survey itself. Questions have been worded to avoid all pronoun references in an attempt to minimize the fear of self-identification and perceived local repercussions. This strategy also has the potential to counter the desired effect. Respondents who see no entry to own specific questions have no lasting commitment to offer an honest, well-reasoned response, if they respond at all. Although there is no tangible proof of this effect with the current result finding, it becomes a consideration in light of the fact that some survey questions remain unanswered by respondents.

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To understand the general tendencies of churchgoing survey respondents in this survey, perhaps it is meritorious to view the survey efforts and organized African-American Church efforts locally that have succeeded. One such effort involved a church-based study of high morbidity and mortality rates among elder African Americans in the Raleigh-Durham area. Researchers understood that church sponsorship was necessary to secure the confidence of elder African Americans locally, but it combined those efforts with local university and community institutions to recruit respondents for the study.

This unified sponsorship, researchers found, reduced concerns by elders that they would be exploited in such a study and that the study may not offer and culturally appropriate research gathering methodologies. As Reed et al. points out, it was essential to involve the church in this study because it targeted a demographic that has been historically ignored by the research community.

The lesson in this model for local African-American churches that choose to pursue spiritual formation is two-fold. First, a successful implementation plan, even one that aims to improve the Church from within, benefits immensely from community-based institutional support. The health study mentioned above was not initiated within the Church. It started at UNC’s Center on Minority Aging, and the project’s researchers understood they needed to reach a population that historically distrusted them. They sought the assistance of an institution, the church that has been known not only to support this population through its

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10 Ibid.

11 Elder Research.
outreach programming, but also might assist in recruiting participants. Spiritual formation models that originate from within the church work against themselves if they do not consider pursuing their goals in the same manner. A program, church-based or otherwise, has as much potential for lasting success as its administrators’ willingness to move beyond the Church for support from entities with a proven track record of program implementation success. Trust is a valuable building block for any program that takes on the challenge of spiritual formation, for itself and the individuals it serves. Edward Hammett explains from his research, “in the secular age we live in relationships are critically important. Many who are spiritually thirsty and searching are in need of relationships where trust, hope, forgiveness, negotiation, redemption, and love can be experienced.”

In another North Carolina-based study by Elizabeth Woodard, spirituality has been found to be one of the primary factors that assisted the healing of African-American women infected with HIV/AIDS. In addition to avoiding presumptuousness by surveying the study participants to discover how each defined spirituality, Woodard also “explores all aspects of a woman’s spirituality, including her reliance on organized religious activities affiliated with African-American churches.” Findings from this study suggest “the African American church is a prominent contributor to the physical and mental well-being of its members;” however, despite overwhelming evidence to support the importance of the church in healing from serious chronic and often fatal illnesses, other findings of this study indicate the local African-American Church

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.
has not been historically been a strong contributor to the well-being of those in the communities they serve and are located in, who are afflicted with HIV.\textsuperscript{16}

It is important to note what succeeded in Woodard’s study. As a researcher, she gained the trust of the population she needed to make inquiry about in order to get reliable qualitative data. Next, she noted the church’s role and responsibilities in supporting the women of this study who draw strength and spiritual fortification from organized religion. Finally, she gathered the testimonies of these women as proof of the need for more church support. Those testimonies, however, provide a crystallized focus on how these women used evangelism and testimony as a means of spiritual growth and in the unintentional pursuit of spiritual formation. One participant, Mandy recounts how she offers scripture to her unchurched son:

I’ve raised him with prayer. He’s a street person. I mean he’s out there. He works every day but he’s out there. He hangs with the boys, he hangs with the girls. But he knows prayer. He knows prayer. That’s the only thing that saving him. I say, “Well, [son’s name] you know what helps you with enemies? Psalm 70. And Psalm 121 will help you for protection when you’re coming and going. So, when you feel people bothering you, read Psalm 70. Psalm 70 is for your enemies. So, read it!” And prayer is power in Psalms.\textsuperscript{17}

A second participant, Susan, acknowledges that prayer is a way of remaining grateful for her life daily and understanding God’s mercy in allowing her to awaken each day:

I can’t see not going a day without praying. And if I thought I’d forgot, even if I’m in bed, if I just fell asleep and didn’t pray, I would get back up just to say a prayer, even if it’s a short prayer. And then go back to bed. Because I feel like the God that woke me up and let me breathe today and gave me a roof over my head and food for me to eat, gave me life for that day. I don’t have to have that. So, I want to make sure that I’m thanking Him every day for the things that other people take for granted. I don’t want to forget those things. Those are very important things because I don’t have to be here.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Women and HIV.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
A third participant, Gail, notes her need to talk about her spirituality with others, regardless of how they are religiously affiliated and despite the fact that she practices her spirituality without spiritual companionship or dependence on another believer: “No, I don’t have a prayer partner. But I let them [my friends] know that I’m blessed. Yeah, I do talk about it, and I’m not judgmental of people. I try not to be. Whatever you want to do is okay with me.” Without a formal model in place, Woodard is able to turn the attention of ailing respondents to spiritual growth, both their own and the growth of others in their lives. The failure of the local African-American Church to capitalize on a similar synergy for the sake of congregants’ spiritual growth, and in many cases, the unwillingness to discuss the subject with other leaders, has stagnated the full embrace of spiritual formation in the Raleigh-Durham area. Although some semblance of spiritual formation was achieved in Woodard’s study, it was an incidence of serendipity, since her original aim was entirely different from this outcome. Although it is not possible to point unquestionably to gender’s impact on spiritual receptivity in these kinds of studies, it is important to note that Woodard’s study involved all women, and this current study of local African-American churches and spiritual formation, in which some respondents were deeply hesitant and/or non-responsive, was 71.4 percent men.

Perhaps the findings made during this brief results can begin to serve as a call to Raleigh-Durham African-American churches to examine the current roles they play in congregants’ lives. While some have taken a more distant approach and focus on general spiritual guidance to individuals while they sit in the Church body for worship, Bible study and other spiritual practices, others have proactively sought individualist foci to reinforce the offerings to current members and reconnect with the unchurched. Where a church finds itself in this debate may

19 Ibid.
depend heavily on its mission, the aspirations of its leadership and how it sees its roles in the larger community.

One example of distant approaches in the larger community is captured by TaQuesa McClain in a study about the church’s role in South Carolina disaster preparedness. She notes that women and minorities have a greater risk of vulnerability during natural disasters than men and non-Hispanic whites.\textsuperscript{20} They do not necessarily have the financial or political resources to either protect themselves from a natural disaster or recover after it happens, so they rely on informal networks, like the church for relief.\textsuperscript{21} While McClain interviewed the pastors who participated in this qualitative study, she also conducted demographic surveys among eight focus groups to learn how participants saw their own: disaster experience, personal preparedness, views about barriers related to preparedness, and ministerial influence related to preparedness.\textsuperscript{22}

Among the pastoral responses, an overwhelming majority of participants agreed that the Church’s role should not be proactive, but reactive, prompting the Church to gather resources after the disaster has hit.\textsuperscript{23} One respondent showed a lack of faith in his church’s desire to respond even reactively: “I think the church would probably mention it, but I don’t think the church would actually spend a lot of time on it…outside of that we would talk about it for a minute, not much.”\textsuperscript{24} When asked why they think the church does not do more to be prepared for natural disasters, the responses varied:


\textsuperscript{21} Natural Disaster.

\textsuperscript{22} Natural Disaster.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
One of the reasons that we sometimes don’t prepare ourselves is because we don’t think that it’s going to hit home.

For some reason we all think that we are exempt.

I just don’t think it's [on the] top of [our] mind. I don’t think we think about it that much . . . and we really haven’t had a lot of natural disasters in this area to really speak of.  

Among women respondents, more than 80 percent of participants report that they have experienced a natural disaster, though only 17 percent said that they have a preparedness kit in their home. The gravity of a natural disaster is not lost on most participants. One woman in a focus group clarifies how she defines the severity of disasters:

I mean when you hear of these disasters happening the thing they give you is counts, constantly the count of number of people deceased the number of people dead. I mean that describes how bad it is, not just by how many homes were destroyed, but how many people actually died. So, when you hear disaster … you know the gravity of whether one life is taken or whether there are 10,000, I mean we kind of look at it from that spectrum. If 10,000 people die it was really bad, you know, but if it's one or two and some homes got destroyed then it's not as bad. So, I think that’s why we tend to go to disaster meaning something that's going to take us.

Most of the focus group participants admit they have no formal plan for preparedness and would likely ride out a storm or a disaster if one occurs; however, each of these respondents reveals they have a partial plan or a “mental” plan in the event of a disaster.

The attitudes that prevail in each of these studies indicate a general willingness to hold steadfastly to the status quo without a real considering for the shifts that are occurring in current times. There is a veil of conventionality that instructs pastors, leaders, and congregants in an unspoken resistance to change. This veil will have to be removed if local churches are to reverse

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Natural Disaster.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
the current unchurched trend. Additionally, and ironically, lasting spiritual growth strategies will require leaders who are committed more to saving souls than to growing Church coffers. The spiritual formation of the Church and the spiritual growth of individual congregants depend on it.

**Major Findings of the Thesis**

**Theme 1: Roles in the Church**

Of the survey respondents, 42.9 percent are pastors, 35.7 percent are associate ministers, and 21.4 percent are elected ministry leaders. None of the respondents who completed the survey serve as deacons. Associate ministers provided the quickest responses. One hundred percent of participants who did not complete the survey until the final two days were pastors.

**Theme 2: Gender**

The majority of respondents, 71 percent are men, and women make up 29 percent of respondents.

**Theme 3: Church Membership Size**

The majority of churches participating in this survey, 42.9 percent, have membership sizes between one-hundred one and one-hundred fifty. The next largest group, 30.7 percent, have smaller memberships of between fifty and one hundred. The two smaller membership groups have between one-hundred fifty and two-hundred fifty members (19.3 percent) and two-hundred fifty members or more (7.1 percent).

**Theme 4: Duration of Church Membership and Church Roles and Responsibilities**

About 76 percent of respondents admit they obey God in response to The Great Commission and have an individual sense of call to mission. All participants have held their current church memberships for at least twenty years. Aside from respondents who have been with their churches for their entire lives (three), the longest duration among respondents is 62
years. Additionally, 57.1 percent have been in their current roles between ten and twenty years. Nearly 36 percent (35.7 percent) have served in current roles for ten years or less, and 7.1 percent of respondents have served for twenty-five years or more. The trajectory of previous roles that led to their current positions includes: usher, choir member, choir director, youth minister and associate minister.

**Theme 5: Families and Youth**

Thirty-nine percent of respondents believe their church fosters spiritual life in families. Slightly fewer respondents (32 percent) believe their church encourages a balance of church and family. Only 14 percent believe that their church develops children’s and family ministries for the twenty-first century. Edward Hammett expresses, “the church is in serious trouble.”\(^\text{30}\) He also averred, “attendance is on the decline in most major denomination; commitment of the core leaders is waning; the leadership is aging rapidly, and most churches are reaching not the new and younger generation.”\(^\text{31}\) No recipients report that their church hosts focus groups on children and youth in spiritual formation; however, a majority (86 percent) believe their church explores and financially invests in youth, their spirituality and their commitment to Christ. In the essay responses to survey questions about the benefits or challenges to spiritual formation among families, the responses were varied:

**Table 1: Respondent Beliefs About Spiritual Formation for Families**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Responses on the Challenges and Benefits to Spiritual Formation for Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 4 – “Family prayer, time, devotion and study is [sic] important.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 12 – “Prayer sessions bible study- train our children and strengthen our family”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Respondent 19 – “This is a tough one. Families are so busy and we have not done a good job of introducing the practice of developing spirituality in families or in our church programs.”

Respondent 21 – “There are several families which have long ties to the church. The desire for many family leaders is for their unsaved loved ones to come to the faith.”

**Theme 6: Spiritual Formation**

The majority of respondents believe that when it comes to church operation practices whether it is strategic planning initiatives, church vision and mission, fostering spiritual formation, their churches frequently or occasionally met expectations. One participant responded that his or her church never meets expectations; however, the majority of respondents (92.6 percent) believe there is no clear written vision for their church’s spiritual formation goals. Another majority, 83 percent, do not believe their churches infuse the best practices of spiritual formation into Church operations; however, only 3 percent believe this infusion includes the encouragement of spiritual companionship in small groups.

About half (53 percent) believe their church consistently shapes its disciples for growth and transformation, but only 40 percent believe their church leaders are spiritually mature—meaning they have undergone the process of spiritual formation and experienced spiritual growth because of that process. Churches fare well with the perception of their spiritual formation impact outside of their churches. Eighty-one percent of respondents believe their church carries a message of spiritual formation outside of the Church into the local community and the world.

A small portion, 16 percent, believe their churches have embraced spiritual formation at the church level to promote a complete embracing of the practice for the entire church ministry. An even smaller number, 8 percent, believe their church promotes diversity in assessing spiritual formation.
At the individual level, 63 percent of respondents say their church nurtures personal attentiveness to God. Fifty-seven percent believe that they apply the concepts learned in spiritual formation in their own lives and in their ministries. Fifty percent believe their church enhances individual spiritual formation by encouraging and practicing fasting, submission, silence, and humility toward God. Fifty-nine percent believe they experience intimate daily worship in a rhythm of prayer and study, silent reflection, solitude and community.

**Theme 7: Church Mission / Corporate Operations**

Slightly more than half of respondents (52 percent) believe their church creates best practices for shifting and advancing the Church. However, slightly less than half of respondents (46 percent) believe their church administers spiritual practices in times of change and around Church issues. Thirty-four percent feel a clarity of purpose and are content with the current overall ministry. Only 12 percent their church measures the demographic and spiritual needs of its immediate community, and only 4 percent believe their church connects people worldwide through prayer and ministry.

When asked about the benefits and challenges of incorporating spiritual formation into their churches’ operations and missions, about half of the respondents (49.7 percent) said they were not sure. Other responses include the following: “The organizational flow is congregational”; “I have to find time to incorporate spirituality into Church Operation practices”; and “The church members function well as a whole, and within various ministries.”

One additional response focused more on the length of prayer in church meetings: “In our Session

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32 Decline.
meetings and Ministry Teams we do incorporate prayer and bible study before beginning our work. It is a real benefit and the only challenge is to keep it short."\textsuperscript{33}

Respondents did not respond accurately to the role of spiritual formation as it relates to community practices for their respective churches. The responses tended to focus more on general community engagement rather than spiritual formation. Some of those responses are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay Responses on the Challenges and Benefits to Spiritual Formation in Community Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 1 – “Very community centered with community services ranging from tutoring, scholarship, social gospel in the urban setting.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 7 – “Provide resources.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 11 – “There are various activities/events during the year with the goal of neighborhood outreach. The most recent event was VBS, in which we transported all who needed a ride to and from church.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 15 – “Primarily challenges.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent 23 – “We don't do any community involvement.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two responses, in particular, gives insight about local leaders’ understanding of the meaning of spiritual formation. When asked about spiritual formation practices among pastors and deacons, one respondent wrote, “Having my own spiritual practice daily has been a real benefit to me as I have grown spiritually and have a better understanding of the scriptures instead of just for research/exegesis purposes. The challenge is to keep it going on a daily basis.”\textsuperscript{34} This response suggests some understanding of the spiritual formation concept. However, responses like the following one indicate there is a need for a basic education component among local leaders.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} Decline.
churches to define spiritual formation: “Both ministries [sic] are hard workers. My desire is for there to be more focused biblical teaching and preaching from whole books of the Bible.”  

**Implications**

The fact that all respondents have been in their current roles for at least twenty years is an indication that many of the perceived spiritual formation habits in the local African-American Church have been in practice for at least two decades. While this may be a sign that many of the traditional pursuits of modern Christianity have earned staying power, it might also be a measure of the willingness of local congregants to change behavioral patterns. To adequately measure the amount of spiritual growth experienced by the respondent who has been actively involved in the local African-American Church for 62 years in progressively responsible positions, additional questions regarding that respondent’s personal spiritual growth could have been posed to obtain a more accurate measure of the respondent’s spiritual growth progression. Without these questions, any quantitative measure for spiritual growth is impossible. Qualitative measure is equally limited without a formal spiritual formation procedure in place. Those who have advanced to positions within the church that require more responsibility have not necessarily been held to any spiritual growth standards in order to achieve that advancement. Herein lies the gap in local churches: congregation leaders have not demanded spiritual formation, and their respective churches have not required it.

The local African-American Church is also missing an opportunity to transform its own future congregation by not implementing spiritual formation programs for youth. According to Boa, spiritual formation begins in infancy, so churches that fail to create and implement

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35 Ibid.

individual development programming for youth may be targeting congregants at a stage where their primary sensibilities about Christ and being Christlike have already been formed. If one considers the sheer number of media, secular events and activities and secular programming that already vie for the attention of youth, then one must admit that a failure to secure a commitment to spiritual formation at a formative age heightens the struggle to keep youth churched. The overwhelming majority of respondents in this survey believe that the Church is doing its part to invest in youth in general, but little to nothing of that investment involves seeing each child as an individual on a lifelong spiritual path.

Despite this lack of attention via youth spiritual formation focus groups or extensive youth spiritual formation programming, the local church has still managed to capture lifelong churchgoers in their youth. This success has likely contributed to membership in the midst of the national decline, but it has also created a comfortability that makes it an ongoing challenge to introduce spiritual formation measures. The 76 percent of respondents who believe they obey God in adherence to The Great Commission may be performing this lifelong act out of allegiance to a habit that began at some time during their youth. Further study is needed to determine whether respondents understand the difference between religious conformity and true spiritual growth.

The fact that such a large percentage of respondents reveal there is no clear written vision statement for their church’s spiritual formation goals has several implications. First, it may be a sign that church founders and/or leaders, historically and present, have not factored spiritual formation into the missions of their churches. The size of the churches participating in this survey study is not necessarily an indication of their longevity. Some have remained small in
membership throughout the duration of their existence; however, those who have either desired to expand or desired to increase their offering may have had those efforts thwarted by an inattentiveness to spiritual formation.

Perhaps the most impacting revelation of this thesis is the fact that there seems to be a chasm between what respondents believe is true about spiritual formation in their respective churches and what their churches put into practice. The attitude surrounding how well the Church supports spiritual growth practices like fasting, praying and humility is strong; yet this same group of respondents seems to have little faith in their leaders’ spiritual maturity. This suggests that although there may not be a common working definition of spiritual formation across congregations in the local community, respondents may understand the concept well enough to acknowledge that something is missing. They also imply a distrust of existing leaders to guide them in this regard.

There should be concern regarding the low percentage of respondents who believe their church practices diversity in assessing spiritual formation. In some cases, a lack of diversity might mean a lack of process altogether. To accurately assess spiritual formation at the church level, local churches will need to solicit the assistance of impartial local or regional institutions. Leaders who might endeavor to appraise their own churches may sometimes be too close to church operations to conduct an assessment objectively. Another challenge presents itself when considering assessing the spiritual formation of the local individual. It is highly improbable that congregants will trust assessment measures from leaders they perceive to be spiritually immature.

While these results from the local African-American Church community suggest that spiritual formation has not been a priority or a regular practice, they also present leaders with a
unique opportunity to pioneer the effort. Although many of the traditional methodologies of Christian faith in pursuit of The Great Commandment have fostered continuity in the church, they have also opened a door for small churches to step boldly into a twenty-first-century spiritual growth model that is customized for every individual believer and every individual church.
CHAPTER 4
LOCAL SPIRITUAL FORMATION MODEL

It is clear, based on the kinds of responses local participants made in this survey, that there is a need for a local model. The majority of participants worship at church homes that have no clear strategy or priority for spiritual formation. In the current quality of life across North Carolina and nationally, any congregation serious about spiritual growth must become active in this pursuit. According to statistics gathered from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) American Community Survey and Uniform Crime Report from 2014, three North Carolina counties, Robeson, Nash and Halifax rank among the top locations in the country for murder.¹ Lumberton and Henderson rank No. 4 and No. 6 respectively for the most dangerous cities nationally.² While the Raleigh-Durham area did not make those infamous lists—and has ranked No. 4 among the most educated cities in the nation—there is still much room for improvement.³ Slightly less than half of the state’s population, 47.51 percent⁴ considers itself religious, the majority of whom affiliate with the Baptist denomination. How have these believers measured their own spiritual growth?

The survey results gathered here suggest that a significant number of congregants in the local African-American Church have not measured spiritual growth and have no clear working definition of spiritual formation. Paul Wick might characterize this group of believers as having

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a “dweller” religious orientation. They find comfort in tradition, unlike seekers, who are explorers and feel more at ease stepping out of their usual comfort zones. The most fulfilling, growth-centered Christian experience combines some elements of both orientations. The traditional slant of the Raleigh-Durham African-American Church community will necessitate spiritual formation models that accommodate both dwellers and seekers. Wick theorizes that the human believer’s spirit continually flows between dwelling, maintaining a traditional foundation, paradigm, and understanding/experience of God, self, others, and seeking, remaining open to new things breaking into one’s life that might challenge a traditional foundation.

This researcher does not seek to disrupt convention in a way that requests the current churched to turn away from traditions. Instead, the models proposed here seek to encourage a spiritually healthy rhythm between dwelling and seeking. The following recommendations are offered in the spirit of exerting that rhythm.

A Working Model: At the Level of the Church

The primary obstacle to developing and implementing a spiritual formation model at the church level is resistance from existing Church leadership. Many cite the desire not to stray away from conventional approaches to prayer, scripture and worship service as the reason they have not actively engaged spiritual formation across the entire corporate body of their church. To shift thinking in this manner, proposed models will have to be created and delivered in ways that allow current leaders to see that spiritual formation is not a request to abandon all traditions of their churches. A cultural sensitivity will be required to keep intact the family and community


6 Ibid.
history, recurring events and approaches to biblical interpretation that have bound congregants over many decades. After all, those traditions have delivered them to the current times.

The research involved in this thesis gives rise to the belief that it would be counter-productive to heavily criticize existing operations processes, missions and organizational practice models in a way that makes them seem wrong. Rather, it is best to approach the changes that are necessary as a way of elevating spiritual growth, to move the Church as a whole from its spiritual infancy to maturity. The goal is to shape the Church as a community that is spiritually formed, a quality that will prompt churches to move in a different manner than they must move as nonprofit corporations. The religious corporation is focused on managing daily operations in a way that keeps financial and other material resources from existing at a deficit. While this may be necessary to maintain the physical church’s existence, it is not connected in any way to the spiritually formed church. The community that is spiritually formed has infused the process of spiritual formation into every practice of the church, including baptism and new membership, worship and praise, leadership selection, revival, outreach ministries and connecting to the events and conditions of the immediate surrounding geographical community. Here are the seven tenets that define the recommended model based on the survey.

**Tenet 1: Find Your Defining Moment**

The idea of discovering a defining moment for a church is intended as a call for both a literal and figurative interpretation. Literally, this tenet calls on local African-American churches as corporate bodies to define the term spiritual formation as it relates to their current existing practices. As noted from the findings, many current local religious leaders are not able to aptly respond to questions about spiritual formation because they have not clearly agreed on a working definition.
The lack of a uniform definition, even within a single congregation, has bred an observed reticence when discussing spiritual formation as a discipline. This is not a call to convene a specialized board or committee for the purpose of composing a definition. Nor is it a nod for existing leaders to define the term in a vacuum or adopt a definition in use by a neighboring congregation. The act of defining what spiritual formation means for a specific congregation will require the input of all congregation members. A clear written vision for the church spiritual formation goals, should be discussed, and agreed upon, by the people who will be directly affected by its application.

Figuratively, seizing a defining moment means the church body recognizes that existing approaches toward spiritual growth have not worked for the collective. Specifically, it requires an unflinching, honest look at the spiritual efficiency of the church. The recommendation is to take forty days to perform an assessment of existing practices. This assessment should be meaningful, unbiased, actionable, sustainable and foster multiple pieces of evidence that point to
the same conclusion: Deliberate spiritual growth at the Church level is indispensable for a twenty-first century church to thrive.

**Tenet 2: Knowledge of the Church**

For the small church that started in a rented storefront or the living room of someone’s home, the idea of not understanding what has come from humble beginnings may be a challenge. Many remember the sacrifices, building fund drives, donations and partnering that made it possible for their current physical church structures to exist. This is a man-driven feat sanctioned by God, and one who has shepherded and led such a feat may believe he knows everything imaginable about his church. The Book of Hebrews reminds believers and religious leaders, however, “For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.”7 This means that despite the laudable accomplishment of physically erecting a church, the spiritual wellness of a church must be its priority. Spiritual formation assists a church in staying focused on its own wellness, but it first much understands how its continuing patterns of behavior either serve or disserve God.

One of the first things a church must do in order to know itself better is revisit its mission. Often, the mission statement in place was crafted during the church’s humble beginnings, and in some cases, no longer fits the needs or practices of the church. According to Bill Tenny-Brittian, most churches have a mission statement that does not achieve the desired results because churches craft these mission statements based on what the church wants to be doing rather than what it is expects to achieve.8 In essence, church mission statements

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7 Heb. 3:4.

become static and irrelevant when they do not account for all the work that congregants and leaders complete in the name of the Church.

FIGURE 1.2

Additionally, Tenny-Brittian suggests that many church mission statements have a misdirected focus. They focus on creating a community of do-gooders, an accomplishment that Tenny-Brittian posits was not the directive given by Jesus Christ:

Too many mission statements ... presume that the church exists to be a nice, safe, do-good-things kind of organization. But that’s hardly the picture Jesus painted of “his church” (Matthew 16:18). *Ultimately the church does not exist to do good things.* That’s United Way’s mission. The difference between the church and United Way is that the church’s mission is to make disciples … and *every good thing the church does is meant to point directly in that direction* (Matthew 5:16). Welcoming and growing and serving and doing good deeds are all a part of what the church does, but all of those are a means to an end. The church’s task is to do all that “good stuff” with one end in mind: To Make Disciples of Jesus Christ.9

Measuring a church mission statement against a church’s success in making disciples of Jesus Christ is an effective way to being aligning a church for spiritual formation. Many

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churches interpret the call for making disciples as a simple call to evangelize by leading others to faith and repentance. John MacArthur suggests the discipleship carries a deeper meaning. It requires transforming someone into a “learning believer—someone who is growing in his faith and his love for the Lord.”¹⁰ The failure to align the church mission with spiritual growth, MacArthur says, may be creating “shallow faith, stunted spiritual growth, and, sadly, false conversion.”¹¹ Many churches pay less attention to believers and focus their attention on converting unsaved seekers:

How can you stress the vital importance of sanctification when you’re aggressively chasing the trends and interests of a spiritually bankrupt world? Too many popular preachers and churches today claim they’re not interested in reaching believers—that their sermons and services are intended solely for unsaved seekers. They even actively discourage believers who want to dig deeper into the riches of Scripture—who hunger for more than just the most basic elements of the gospel, if they’re even getting that much.¹²

This view of church missions might, at first glance, seem pessimistic. Accepting it might mean that a large cross-section of contemporary African-American churches has forsaken its current membership; however, understanding it as a truth leaves room for an opportunity to re-craft missions. They should be focused both on unsaved seekers and believers who are interested in pursuing spiritual formation. As much as a church seeks to spread the word of God to those who are disenchanted, it should take a close look at those who are already showing up consistently for service. This includes assessing where each individual in a congregation has progressed in spiritual growth and co-designing a plan for that growth to continue infinitely. This path to corporate spiritual growth begins inside the church body, and it must start with an honest assessment of church missions.


¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.
Tenet 3: Understanding the Community

Most (96 percent) of the participants in this survey represent small churches situated in low- to middle-income neighborhoods. Not all of the outreach programming of these churches targets the neighborhoods where they are located. This major shortcoming obstructs the progress of spiritual formation locally. Derick Scudder, who grew up in rural North Carolina and started a church in a low-income North Philadelphia neighborhood, posits that churches in low-income neighborhoods rarely experience any growth, either in membership or spiritual formation. Scudder believes that one reason this lack of church growth in poor neighborhoods has been consistent is because of the congregations’ perceptions about the people who live near or around the church.

Church leaders and believers who attend church in these neighborhoods tend to oversimplify poverty and connect its roots only to the lack of money; move out of the neighborhood and transfer their memberships; fail in adapting to the education gap of area residents; and rely on conversions, and not transfers from other churches outside of the neighborhood for their growth. Scudder believes this challenge calls for a cross-cultural ministry to address these pressing issues and clear the path for church growth and spiritual formation.

More of our resources in America should be focused on reaching places not that are hip, but where people need help. Denominations and church-planting organizations should have plans, training, and structures in place to start churches in poor rural, suburban, and inner-city communities. When Christians are looking for a new place to live, they should consider the impact they can have for the kingdom of God in a poor neighborhood rather than just looking for comfort and convenience. One of the best ways to help the poor is to live next door to them.

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14 Ibid.
We need to get used to doing cross-cultural ministry in our own backyards. We need to plan and work to stay in these places long term. We need to recognize that there are great people who aren’t great readers but who still need to get introduced to a great God. We need to be patient, pray, and wait for God to save people. We don’t have to rope off poor communities in America and assume that the church can’t grow there.\(^{15}\)

While each church in this thesis presents a unique scenario in relation to the community where it is located, there can be a common approach to knowing and understanding an immediate neighborhood beyond general outreach. The mentality of churches must shift to embracing surrounding neighborhoods as their own. If they exist in a neighborhood, they must positively contribute to that neighborhood, connect on a level that moves beyond mere recruitment or church event solicitation. They must function as if the neighborhood is home.

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Tenet 4: Temper Leadership

One of the most revealing results of this survey has been the perception of leaders within the church body. Most of the participants consider their leaders to be spiritually immature\textsuperscript{16}, which presents an ever-present challenge to spiritual formation at the church level. A congregation that cannot look to its leaders for steadfast spiritual guidance cannot aptly achieve collective spiritual formation.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{church_leadership_spiritual_maturity.png}
\caption{Church leadership is spiritually mature}
\end{figure}

\textbf{FIGURE 1.4}

Although many church leaders have found significant success operating as organization CEOs building impressive church campuses and authoring books that detail their rise to such success, they have not yet achieved a level of accomplishment aligned with scriptural instructions for being a leader. Rather than seeing themselves as seasoned, spiritually formed leaders, they see themselves as church entrepreneurs marketing the church itself to a base of consumers. Hebrews

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16}Bailey, 2016.
\end{itemize}
13:7 instructs congregants to “Remember your leaders, who spoke God’s message to you; reflect on the outcome of their lives and imitate their faith.” If congregants follow this directive, reflecting on the outcomes of their leaders’ lives, and still have little faith in their spiritual maturity, it reasons that the leaders still have significant work to do in spiritual formation.

Steven J. Cole posits, “Godly church leaders are responsible to lead God’s flock by walking personally with God and by working together to help church members do the same.”

Since the primary tool for leadership in this manner is influence, leaders should have a clear and present who of Godly characteristics and should maintain a sound working knowledge of how the Church should be structured in the eyes of God. Often this may mean dealing with difficult situations and guiding congregations through that difficulty with spiritual growth in mind. Cole says many leaders avoid this difficulty, desiring to avoid conflict:

> Often, out of an attempt to please everyone, church leaders dodge difficult problems. They don’t want to confront an influential church member who is in sin. They don’t want to teach on doctrines that are not popular, even if they are biblical. They don’t confront someone who is teaching error, for fear of stirring up conflict. They don’t want to get involved in resolving relational conflicts in the church or in church families. But to dodge such difficult matters is to fail to lead the church. Church leaders must actively pursue God and His truth, and help others do the same. 

The opposite of this premise is the existence of constant conflict, specifically among leaders, in a church. This, too, shows evidence of spiritual immaturity. Cole suggests that leaders see themselves as plural and work together to “safeguard against the abuse of authority, [since]... the task of shepherding a local church is far too great for one man.”

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19 Ibid.
The current thesis suggests that leaders have a need to undergo a period of learning before fully assuming leadership roles. VintageChurch in Raleigh, North Carolina provides an opportunity for leaders to immerse in understanding their responsibilities to God and their flocks. The organization groom’s attendees for a practice known as “church planting,” which is a “sort of finishing school [that] provides gifted pastors and leaders the opportunity to continue to refine the gifts God has given them either as they plant or just before they plant a church.” This incubator accepts only six new pastors per year for twelve meetings over eight months to help them plant and grow a church.

While this type of cohort could not accept mass numbers of ministers and leaders from the local area, its basic premise could be duplicated. Its very existence is predicated on the idea that leadership is not a role to take lightly even if one considers himself answering a calling from God. It takes time to develop the proper skills to lead a congregation in the way God intends and in a way, that fosters communal spiritual formation. Perhaps leaders should shift how they view stepping into a leadership role. One does not ascend to leadership; he or she submits to service.

Tenet 5: Practice Spiritual Improvisation

Churches should not take comfort in existing in a vacuum without regard for the culture that is continually developing all around them. They should stay aware of how their neighborhoods, cities, states and countries are evolving as they, too, are evolving. This does not suggest that they should consider themselves of the world and prioritize worldly things; however, it does urge what Angela Reed calls a type of improvisation to stay in spiritual formation mode. Reed suggests that many contemporary congregations have a denominational loyalty that deprives them of broader meaningful opportunities for spiritual growth “because of distinct

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theological perspectives or years of unchanging church experiences, it does not even occur to congreational members that God may be interested in doing a new thing among them."  

She acknowledges that believers can never truly escape the cultures in which they live, but believes congregations do everything possible to sustain the culture created within the congregation, while shutting out the culture around them. One example Reed gives of a congregant acting in spiritual formation and countering this internal culture sustaining habit that she terms “habitation spirituality” is of a connection between a believer, named Thomas, and an agnostic, named Jason. Although Thomas is fully grounded in his faith, he is not afraid to listen to his friend’s agnostic positions and have an authentic relationship with him:

What Jason does not know is that Thomas learned to give up control of the convicting process years ago, in part through exploring spiritual direction training. He came to trust that the Holy Spirit is already at work in every human being to fulfill God's purposes. Thomas believes his primary responsibility in both evangelism and ongoing congregational care is to prayerfully walk alongside in the spiritual journey, even when his partner is agnostic.

The basic premise in Reed’s example is that Thomas understands the kind of spiritual growth that is possible as a result of relationship with Jason. This is a possibility that many congregations and believers in those congregations close themselves off to and never get to fully experience.

Navigating differences, which is not the same condescending concept as tolerating difference, requires a spiritual improvisation that allows the believer to encounter any circumstance and remain rock solid in his spiritual walk. Reed suggests this most similarly

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22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.
resembles theatrical improvisation, where one never knows how the story will unfold but inherently trusts the process. Churches have to open themselves up to this kind of improvisation and not rely solely on their internal cultures if they are going to foster environments that are ripe for spiritual formation. A failure to see the world beyond their doors is a decision to not be spiritually formed.

**Tenet 6: Practice One-Anothering as an Element of Accountability**

In most scenarios, when a church considers the idea of accountability, it carries a negative connotation. Typically, it is connected to being taken to task for some wrongdoing or having to answer for decisions or events that are within the scope of one’s control. The path to spiritual formation may involve this negative aspect of accountability, but it also focuses on positive aspect, as well, for balanced spiritual growth. In some contemporary contexts, this has been referred to as “one-anothering,” the conscious decision to “let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works.” Numerous scriptures encourage believers to be responsible for and to one another and to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

The spiritually formed congregation engages this practice both consciously and subconsciously. It is a mantra repeated in every aspect of membership, from the church vision statement to simple praise and worship. After a conscious turning to this as a manner of spiritual operation, it ultimately becomes a subconscious practice. In a church community infused with one-anothering, congregants understand fundamentally who they are to one another. They are a part of a divine community where each individual perseveres with discipline and concerted effort.

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26 Eph. 5:21.
to grow spiritually in the presence of the church community as a whole. The relationships that congregants have in one-anothering becomes a daily high priority.

**Tenet 7: Measure Spiritual Progress**

Because the state of spiritual formation places one in a state of constantly improving, it is essential to define benchmarks for measuring growth. This has been a difficult process for most churches. According to Alan Danielson, although “churches have tried to measure the spiritual growth of parishioners by having people complete courses, studies, classes, and curricula.”

These educational events have always been effective at measuring knowledge, processes and participation, but they have never definitively proven to produce disciples.

To move away from this traditional approach to discipleship, Danielson discusses five key areas proposed by *Chazown* author and Senior Pastor Craig Groeschel of Edmond Oklahoma’s LifeChurch.tv: physical life, relationships with people, relationship with God, work life, and financial life. When concentrating on financial life, for example, the Church could create small focus groups that teach members how to “conquer debt, live on a budget, plan for the future, and become generous givers.” What is sustainable about this approach is that it is ongoing and does not seek to measure knowledge or processes. A member would continue participating in this group in order to continue growth, and any financial concepts and practices would be designed in alignment with financial concepts in the Bible. In this manner, even a believer’s finances would follow the directives put forth by God in scriptures. The same would be true for any focus groups centered on any of the remaining four key areas.

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28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.
Churches that follow this model for measuring spiritual growth must be sure to set realistic spiritual goals, integrate those goals with congregants existing habits and systems (i.e., lesson texts on smartphones and other electronic devices), and implement doorposts, or visible, emotional, inspiring things one might “encounter every day that regularly reminds you of what was while simultaneously inspiring you with what could be.”31 It is important to note that doorposts are not the same as goals. Goals are measurable and achievable. Doorposts are things that have already been accomplished, yet they inspire one to accomplish something new.

For both churches and individuals, measuring spiritual growth is a slow, life-long process. Churches that are spiritually formed should ask The Holy Spirit to mold this process as they continue to foster the environments for The Holy Spirit to do that work. The focus should remain on what a church is becoming rather than what it is doing. At any time that a church feels a need to see how it is performing as a collective body in spiritual formation, it should always look to its own doorposts—what it has been as a congregation and what it is becoming daily—for an accurate measurement.

A Working Model: At the Level of the Individual

Much of contemporary spiritual formation focuses on a secular, individualist pursuit of the practice. Although the goal is spiritual growth, it is a slightly different pursuit than religious spiritual formation, which seeks growth in God and not growth exclusively on the self for the purpose of the self. Angela Reed reminds Christian practitioners that even religious spiritual formation carries some danger.

Christian faith and practice that focuses on self rather than communal formation, interiority rather than an outward missional focus, and a de-traditionalized eclecticism rather than a firm theological grounding. This raises a key question

… Do spiritual guidance practices contribute to the formation of person, community, and mission or do they emphasize one of these three at the expense of the others?\textsuperscript{32}

This researcher does not adhere to the belief that the formation of person, community, or mission has to be compromised in order to do work in one of these areas. Spiritually formed individuals comprise a spiritually formed church, though the road to transformation may be filled with several conversions. The greatest example of this in modern times is still the story of Saul of Tarsus becoming the Apostle Paul. Much of what Christians study concerns the wise epistles and directives he issued as the Apostle Paul; his work is significant. As a mode of delivery into the kingdom of God, a pre-conversion phase is often as meaningful as conversion. In the Apostle Paul’s pre-conversion phase:

Saul has gained a reputation as the ringleader of the movement to make Christianity extinct. A devout Hellenistic Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, Saul was a member of the Pharisees and was taught by none other than Gamaliel...Saul did not agree with his teacher, Gamaliel, on how Christians should be dealt with, however. Rather, he sought the arrest, trial, conviction, and punishment (with imprisonment the norm and death the ideal, it would seem) of those in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{33}

Although the Apostle Paul worked steadfastly against Christianity and eagerly sought to rid the world of it in his pre-conversion phase, it was a seminal moment for his own spiritual growth. Robert L. Deffenbaugh asserts that during this phase when he opposed Christ, he took on a missionary spirit in his pursuit to end Christianity.\textsuperscript{34} To devote one’s life to such an all-consuming act is also a devotion to learning every intimate detail about it, and in spreading the word to destroy Christianity, the Apostle Paul succeeded in spreading the word about it. His counteraction was a successful act that worked for Christianity. By the time, he has his

\textsuperscript{32} Quest for Spiritual Community, 2010.


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
conversion and begins to give his account of the conversion,\textsuperscript{35} the Apostle Paul has been adequately prepared for the journey ahead of him. His pre-conversion has prepared him for the adversity he must encounter after his conversion. By the time, he is making the case for his release from imprisonment to King Agrippa,\textsuperscript{36} he understands well the nature of persecution for believing in Jesus Christ as the Son of God because he has experienced in from two distinct vantage points: as the persecutor and as the persecuted.

This moment is a reminder to believers to consider the pre-conversion lessons for their lives. Every event that leads to a conversion is instructive, both for the converted and the other lives he or she will help to transform. The first step toward a life of consistent spiritual formation is accepting the lessons from the pre-conversion period. Although this time is also filled with sin, it is often the time in which one’s inherent spiritual gifts are sharpened. Often, the sharpening happens as a means of survival of one’s life circumstances. The actual conversion happens when one recognizes his gifts are a gift from God. Post-conversion begins the life-long journey of spiritual formation. It is when a believer understands that everything that has happened from first breath to the present has been designed for spiritual growth.

\textsuperscript{35} 1 Cor. 15:1-11.

\textsuperscript{36} Acts 26:12-18.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS

Problems and Possibilities of the Twenty-First Century Church: Organizational Context

During the modern era, churches have catered to segments of society while ignoring the desires and needs of others, which has exacerbated its inefficacy. The demographics of American society have shifted sharply over the last two decades. Catering to all social and ethnic groups in society rather than just targeting the middle and elite classes has emerged as the church’s most pressing twenty-first century concern at both the local and global levels. This has prompted a dire need for churches to change their mission and outreach philosophies.

The influx of immigrants has diversified urban centers, which has rendered the church’s message obsolete in the eyes of many. Perceived discriminatory dimensions conveyed by the church adds a dimension of exclusivity to the existing message. Findings from the 2008 Landscape survey suggest that Christian leaders and pastors at the local level rethink and reconfigure how they devise and carry out their ministries to effectively address the needs of congregation members. The viable solutions lie in developing ministries in an idiosyncratic fashion while also imparting the Gospel to a diverse audience in a non-prejudicial manner. This will require churches to look beyond its own doors for feasible solutions to current membership crises rather than sustaining its current inward focus and internal reorientation.¹ Christian ministry needs to restructure its leadership, service strategies, and organizational structures to effectively impart the mission and the Word of God in a way that considers people from all backgrounds, ethnicities, nationalities, political affiliations, and social classes, regardless of the extent of their religiosity can comprehend, assess, embrace, and ultimately internalize through

conventional means. This paradigm shift would address the spiritual needs of individuals living in a modern and postmodern epoch, thereby speaking and reaching out to a wider audience.

The notion of a "born-again" Christian has repeatedly appeared in public discourse and has become ubiquitous within the evangelical community. The term itself has come to convey a particular meaning about a Christian belief in the acceptance of Jesus Christ and repentance for sins. Based on the general and accepted use of this term, approximately “forty-five percent of Americans identify themselves as born-again Christians,”2 ready to absolve themselves of their sins in order to fervently devote their lives to serving God and disseminating God’s message across the globe. Evangelicals repeatedly have devised and adopted lexicons that analyze the language found in both the Old and New Testaments. Although the language used is unequivocally idiosyncratic according to locale and demographic composition in various regions, an imagined community of evangelicals forged together by the common belief in Christian ministry and mission around the world would still be able to recognize the terminology “born-again Christian.” Despite the fact that evangelical Christians have encroached on a vast array of religious denominations that each preach God’s message in an idiosyncratic fashion with regards to doctrine and worship, evangelicals nonetheless share many of the same characteristics. This commonality among denominations could be an asset for enacting spiritual formation, especially for local African-American Christian denominations.

All branches publically assert their personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ, the human incarnation of the Lord and Savior. Moreover, they view scripture and scriptural texts as being authoritative in governing how believers must treat others and comport themselves because their actions directly reflect those of God. Finally, evangelicals publicly profess their steadfast

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commitment to spreading "the message of the gospels." Over time, churches have organized their events and activities around inviting people to a vast array of events in order to entice and recruit non-believers and the unchurched into local church chapters. Rather than remaining a so-called institution of invitation, evangelicals must infiltrate areas and remote locales where nonbelievers and the unchurched reside and socialize in order to diffuse God’s message more effectively. There is a direct benefit to using a means connected to secular vehicles to transport a sacred message. Although a church is unable to offer or give more to adherents than many other worldly institutions can, the Gospel itself, which manifests the Word of God separates the church from secular matters while also granting local branches social and cultural authority/agency.

This kind of incursion into the local community has the power to help evangelicals and individual churches carry out their missions according to Scriptural precepts and remain politically relevant within the context of the twenty-first century. Simply put, the spiritual disconnection that has occurred across the Christian denomination divide will require evangelicals and disciples to meet people where they are.

Ubiquitous distrust of institutional authority has propelled new pastors and church leaders who are not tethered to traditional institutional power structures to accept the task of navigating the church’s obstacles within modern and postmodern contexts. Pastors and other church leaders must also execute their ministries in a far more disparate fashion than they have in the past by becoming more mission-oriented. Their focus should shift to saintly and apostolic concerns and preoccupations rather than market-driven and glib ones. Church leaders must continue to read and reread Christian Scripture in order to effectively adapt scriptural precepts to shifting political

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4 Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 55.
and cultural contexts and attract believers and neophytes. This will assist in rendering Christian evangelism relevant to modern believers.

Additionally, to make room for spiritual formation in the local African-American Church, authority must be removed from particular offices within local church branches. Collectively, these offices represent the institution toward which many hold a high range of skepticism and distrust. Rather, power should be reoriented and shifted towards the parishioners, who have earned both the respect and trust of seminarians.\(^5\) Relational networking with other pastors, church leaders, and denominations would also ease the high demands that are currently placed on and straining larger congregations at the local level. Doing so would eliminate the stigmatizations that remain tethered to bureaucratic hierarchies of the old model ministry but avoids disempowering church leaders.\(^6\)

Another area where churches can make inroads to clear a path for more spiritual formation practitioners is in civil liberties. Would-be congregants have stayed away from formal congregations because church positions on civil liberties issues have not always been clear. Modern evangelical theology conveys a hackneyed ambivalence towards taking action to promote international human rights, though some independent evangelists have chosen to step up and speak out. For many decades, evangelicals have trumpeted the importance of preserving human rights around the world and thus churches have often ascended to the fore of social services.\(^7\) Nonetheless, various non-governmental and evangelical organizations have cropped up

\(^5\) Gibb, *ChurchNext*, 69.

\(^6\) Ibid, 70.

\(^7\) Ibid, 144.
to take on the challenge of human rights. This signals that evangelicals will likely become more ensconced in international human rights movements in the next few decades.\(^8\)

In his thought-provoking polemic *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*, Eddie Gibbs examines the state of Christianity during an epoch when untraditional and Eastern religions, combined with the shifting cultural contexts as a result of the impact modernism and postmodernism, threaten to marginalize Christianity in the western world. As a result, Christianity must transform itself in a post-Christian world. He provides a rigorous overview of secondary literature on the state and the role of the Christian Church in an increasing secularized world. In a candid fashion, using scripture as his primary justification, Gibbs evaluates the strengths and limitations of various new church models in meeting the goals of evangelism in the face of modernization and secularization. He proposes nine areas that the church must revamp in order to fulfill its message and comply with the biblical message that validates the purpose of evangelicalism.

As Gibbs states in his introduction, the Church remains an outdated and seemingly anti-modern institution that continues to grapple with shifting cultural contexts wrought by the processes that undergird modernity. Thus, it has lost its socio-cultural currency, resulting in many youth "opting to define their spiritual journey."\(^9\) Other scholars concur that evangelical leaders have employed new modes of organization to accomplish collective goals, moving them from a subaltern position to a more mainstream one in post-Christian society.\(^10\) Drawing from the nascent developments in the Christian Church when it did not suffer from external political


\(^9\) Gibbs, *ChurchNext*, 11.

and social interests, Gibbs posits that although the Christian Church must navigate "major storm centers" representing two distinct worlds, Western churches can emulate the tactics of churches globally in order to adequately address pluralistic concerns which the West, so far, has ignored.¹¹

By transforming mission, the agenda for church leadership and learning, institutional structures, modes of spirituality, worship and evangelism, churches can adequately adapt to the seismic cultural shifts occurring in the West. Congregations must include those with differing worldviews, and church leaders have the obligation to cater to each group of believers and recognize their idiosyncratic generational and cultural biases that they often mask to shield themselves from theological bias. Thus, the project of rendering the church a useful and relevant institution is not just a project done at the micro level. It is also a global and relational one predicated on networking and reevaluating scripture as it relates to shifting current contexts. Contemporary cultural shifts also have impacted the pastoral training for future Church leaders, resulting in the need to restructure how the church trains its future leaders to become paragons of Christian spirituality.¹²

Bill Easum inspirations on church leadership was a useful approach for developing local church spiritual formation, he states, “By far, the greatest challenge in the early part of the 21st century is the need to raise up leaders who can function in a world of speed, blur, and flux. Every discipline, including the church, is running out of world-class leaders. It is sheer folly to think that the people who led us well during modernity can give us the same quality of leadership in the postmodern/pre-Christian world. Churches need to pour more time, energy, and money into training than they do construction. Finally, twenty-first century leaders are willing to change their life metaphors to carry on the mission. The ability to change depends on the level

¹² Ibid. 120.
of your passion for the mission—how badly do you want to be in the midst of what God is about in this world?’”13 Easum encourage leaders to envision standards of leadership and explains what leadership should look like in the twenty-first century perspective:

- Leaders are obedient to a call greater than their own lives. A leader does what has to be done to achieve the mission. Mission dictates action. This is the all-consuming passion.
- Leaders are passionate about Jesus Christ and are flexible about most other things. Because of this passion to change lives, leaders can remain focused on the core issues regardless of the distractions.
- Leaders have a different set of life metaphors. Life metaphors are the unwritten and mostly unconscious assumptions, rules, and prejudices that form the basis of how we feel, think and act.
- Leaders approach life intuitively as if led by the Holy Spirit. These leaders pray: "God put us in the flow of what You are doing in this world."
- Leaders innovate on the fly. This means they are living at the messy edge of chaos without becoming part of the chaos.
- Leaders know that most ministries throughout the church occur best in a team-based environment. Teams, unlike committees, are put together by a leader who casts a vision for a ministry and then fills the team with compatible people with complementary gifts.14

Rather than focusing on performance, Gibbs, however, argues that Christian leaders must show an intimate knowledge of God and pursue a lifestyle that reflects how the Church’s mission is to live according to the gospel. Competence in leadership has emerged as an integral concern for easing pastoral ministry strains that have hindered Christian ministry over the past few centuries.15 Gibbs devotes an entire chapter to discussing the necessity of restructuring church leadership and educational agendas in order to mentor leaders who can evangelize modern and

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14 Ibid.
postmodern generations. Other theological scholars disagree. While Gibbs emphasizes the role of environment in the context of Christian ministry and the effectiveness of evangelism to reach a modern and postmodern audience, other scholars reject this theoretical viewpoint, suggesting instead that theology, rather than church structure, affects modern-day evangelism.

Gibbs tends to deemphasize how organizational ideology and theological viewpoints greatly impact evangelism worldwide, especially in the Western context. While the environment plays a formative role in forging networks and coalitions, it does not play a significant role in evangelism. Thus, Gibbs fails to address the nuances of the impact of environment and context for Christian ministry. Subsequently, he fails to address the success of evangelical endeavors fully. Nonetheless, he does emphasize the need for Church leaders to act in accordance with the beliefs they articulate week after week.

Biblical Support for Establishing Church-Organized Evangelistic Efforts

Both subtle and blaring examples of the mandate to proselytize and spread the gospel permeate the Old and New Testaments. The concept of biblical revelation, however controversial, undergirds the evangelical mission to diffuse the message of the gospels to all...however remote from the world. Humanity remains lost without Jesus Christ, and a chasm between God and His people always exists in mortality. Thus, Christ sought to save the lost souls of human beings, who, without him, lack the ability to save themselves and as "lost

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sheep,” do not exist in the eyes of God.\textsuperscript{19} Because Jesus died for human salvation and reconciliation with God, and because God wants all humans to achieve salvation, the Holy Spirit functions to facilitate people's progression towards reaching that salvation.\textsuperscript{20} God uses Christ to foster faith in evangelism and emulation of Christ's mission to proselytize.

Mission and evangelism cannot be merged in the modern context. Mission has a more encompassing definition that does not situate it as a synonym to evangelism, but nonetheless includes it. The nature of God spawns mission as a manifestation of His activity in the mortal realm, as He dispatched Jesus and the apostles into the world as well as the Holy Spirit and the Church itself to infiltrate the hearts of human beings.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the mission of God is transposed onto the Church, whose mission is to emulate His example. Jesus' ministry was to heal the sick and fed the hungry while comforting the melancholy and resurrecting the dead. He selflessly served others in the service to God and constantly preached about the influence his Church would have on the world. That overwhelming influence surfaced as the central theme in his preaching when he asserted to his congregation, "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world."\textsuperscript{22} Jesus also states that "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."\textsuperscript{23} Because God sent Jesus to spread the message of the gospels globally, evangelists must also serve the people of the world in the same vein.

Scholars and critics of the present state of the Church and Christianity emphasize the need to become active agents in fulfilling the Great Commission, Christ's command to Christians

\textsuperscript{19} Matt. 9:36.
\textsuperscript{20} John 16:8.
\textsuperscript{22} Matt. 5:13-14.
\textsuperscript{23} John 20:21.
to spread the message of the gospels and foster fervor in non-believers and recruit disciples. Going out and proselytizing rather than inviting people into church congregations represents a necessary shift in ministry tactics in the present day.\textsuperscript{24} The evidence of this command in the scripture is clear. All four gospels emphasize the need to see this objective come to fruition, although each has a different emphasis that includes sending out church representatives to diffuse gospel teachings by threading them together.\textsuperscript{25} Religious scholars all stress the necessity for the Church today to fulfill this command globally, requiring all evangelical churches to fulfill their duty within their local contingencies.\textsuperscript{26}

God has rendered humans representative of the divine on earth, thus propelling people to serve Him through mission and diffusion of God's word to unchurched locales: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."\textsuperscript{27} Although evangelicals have an obligation to engage in missionary work and transform the unchurched into disciples, they also must fulfill the Church’s and their own individual duty to "love thy neighbor."\textsuperscript{28} The scriptures call for the Church and its disciples to turn outward instead of inward, becoming a church for others. Heeding this call would transform current church structures that have contributed to the decline of spiritual fervor in modern and postmodern contexts.

It is apparent that evangelism constitutes a formative component of the Christian mission. Evangelism translates into the proclamation of good news, not always religious in nature. In Thessalonians, Timothy articulates to Paul his gleefulness that the Thessalonians demonstrated

\textsuperscript{24} Gibbs, \textit{ChurchNext}, 55.
\textsuperscript{25} See Matt. 28:18; Mark. 16:15; Luke. 24:45-49; and John 17:18.
\textsuperscript{26} Gibbs, \textit{ChurchNext}, 55.
\textsuperscript{27} Matt. 28:19-20.
\textsuperscript{28} Basis of Evangelism.
their love and faith. Similarly, the archangel Gabriel gleefully tells Zechariah that his wife is pregnant with a baby boy. Both are good news. The spread of good news braces the evangelical agenda, which serves no observable quota or prescribes no numerical goal. Ultimately, evangelism in its biblical context does not necessitate mass conversion, but rather to proclaim good news and spread the message of the gospels regardless of the results it yields in terms of converts.

Furthermore, the means of evangelizing remains irrelevant and manifests itself through various words and actions. One can evangelize through speech, visual iconography, and through actions that mirror a "Christ-centered life." Paul claims in the New Testament that despite the plethora of variations of scripture, the apostolic tradition inherent in the gospels represents the teaching of God and can be reconstructed. Scholars have reached a consensus that Jesus manifests the good news of God, which explains why Paul described himself at the beginning of his proclamation of the gospel vis-a-vis his letter to the Romans as "set apart for the Gospel of God...concerning his Son...Jesus Christ our Lord."

The events of the gospel, mainly the death of Jesus and his subsequent resurrection, occupied an integral part of the good news. Although the apostles discussed the ministry and life of the mortal Jesus as well as his role as savior and judge, they emphasized his demise and resuscitation as an expression of divinity that conflated him with the honorable and omnipotent Lord. The apostles further publically touted the gospel witnesses, as they proclaimed to have

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29 I Thess. 3:6.
31 Basis of Evangelism.
32 I Cor. 15:11.
33 Rom. 1:1-4.
witnessed the great resurrection of Jesus.\textsuperscript{35} Through evangelistic experience, the apostles spread good news via the apprenticeship method in a similar fashion that Jesus disseminated the word of God.\textsuperscript{36}

Another strand of evangelism involves conveying the promises offered by the gospels. The dissemination of the good news did not revolve merely around the past event of Jesus' death and resurrection. Rather, it involved Christ in the contemporary context, and the historic events provide a basis for what contemporary Christians can look forward to in the present. Salvation promises that one's sins are forgiven and that the Holy Spirit will embrace one with open arms, offering a person a new life bereft of sin and guilt.\textsuperscript{37}

Finally, evangelicals preach the promises of the gospel through faith and repentance. Those who repent and believe in Jesus would secure forgiveness from their sins via Jesus.\textsuperscript{38} Primarily, this faith and repentance is consecrated through baptism. The sacrament of baptism functioned as a public symbol of repentance and one's faith in Jesus as the Lord and Savior.\textsuperscript{39} The presence of Christ and God's good news is transmitted to Christ's disciples, putting the onus of evangelism on generations of Christian disciples.\textsuperscript{40} Evangelism has meant disseminating the message of the Gospel with the public, while good news has become conflated with the person of Jesus. Jesus became a martyr for the sin inherent in humanity, and God resurrected Jesus as a tool to grant forgiveness of sins to those who repented and underwent baptism to absolve themselves of their sin.

\textsuperscript{35} Acts. 2:32.  
\textsuperscript{36} Gibbs, Church\textit{Next}, 56.  
\textsuperscript{37} Acts 2:38.  
\textsuperscript{38} Acts. 10:43.  
\textsuperscript{39} Basis of Evangelism.  
\textsuperscript{40} Gibbs, Church\textit{Next}, 57.
Evangelism during the twenty-first century promises to yield a litany of benefits within local contexts, despite the challenges new church models face. Modern and post-modern obstacles and forces, including modernism, postmodernism, the secularization of society-at-large, and deconstructionism all pose major threats that increasingly marginalized the Christian church in the Western world. This challenges spiritual formation at its core. Christians who feel that marginalization may be less likely to engage in the practice of spiritual formation.

The Church has indeed been forced to operate from a peripheral position as a result of the confluence of the forces aforementioned earlier. Churches nonetheless continue to exert immense and meaningful influence on believers and non-believers alike, propelling adherents and listeners to transform themselves according to modern exigencies. Within the local context, church leaders must adapt and appropriate their view of scripture to shifting cultural and social contexts. The 2008 Landscape Survey unequivocally conveys that religiosity is not completely missing, even among the unchurched, contrary to popular opinion. People continue to feel disenchanted and disillusioned by dogmatism both past and present. This disenfranchisement has propelled them to pursue salvation in a far more personal and individual manner. Quantum shifts in American culture and society clearly requires the implementation of a proactive and concrete spiritual formation strategy to engage believers and make them feel more connected to the Church.
Reflections

The genuine heart of Christ mission and will was an adventure towards others to locate the genuine 'them' and experience together understanding the God who is love and who made everyone. Being said, leaders must forever focus the church attention toward God, through creating and developing its mission and operation on spiritual formation, in the truth of our regular day-to-day existence. Similarly, as every day the local church must open its eyes to the common world around us, most profound sense of being is an opening of the heart, the internal identity, to a world present nature. The local church must remember that as individuals, out of affection and adoration, God created his people. At the center of our being and our most profound self lies the potential for goodness/wholeness.

God whose wills is that all men know Him as the true Savior and come to reality this is our association with Him which empowers the local church to see the blessed/sacrosanct in all of life. What's more, in the matter of spiritual formation, even with eyes, as individuals a significant amount of the love and joy God offers can be missed. As He calls the eyes of the spirit to view Him, the local church and its leadership must be prepared to go energetically addressing the issue of spiritual formation, which is the reason one commit to a deep-rooted relationship with Jesus Christ understanding every day brings new revelations, new potential outcomes.
APPENDIX A

Survey

THE LOCAL CHURCH SPIRITUAL FORMATION SURVEY

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Thank you for taking this survey. Answer the inquiries to the best of your capacity. Make an effort not to overthink the inquiries; rather, put forth a strong effort, only using your initial reaction to what is inquired. You are under no commitment to answer any questions. Your genuineness is valued and we regard your privacy in this procedure.

**Church Operation Practices**

1 = Never  
2 = Seldom  
3 = Occasionally  
4 = Frequent  
5 = Always

1. Strategic planning initiatives, church vision and mission foster spiritual formation and discipleship?  
2. Clearly written vision for your ministry's spiritual formation goals?  
3. Infuse best practices of spiritual formation in church operations?  
4. Create best practices for shifting and advancing the church?  
5. In times of change around church issues, are spiritual practices administered?

**Families Practices**

1 = Never  
2 = Seldom  
3 = Occasionally  
4 = Frequent  
5 = Always

1. Foster spiritual life in families?  
2. Church encourages a balance of church and family?  
3. Develop children and families' ministries for the 21st century?  
4. Host focus groups on children and youth in spiritual formation?  
5. Explore and financially invest in youth, their spirituality and commitment to Christ?
Leadership and Ministries Practice

1. Encourage spiritual companionship in small groups?

2. Church leadership is spiritually mature?

3. Advance church spiritual formation for all - embracing church ministry?

4. Service (Obey God in response to the Great Commission or have an individual sense of call to mission)?

5. Church members feel clarity of purpose and contentment with ministry?

Community Practices

1. Measure the demographic and spiritual needs of the community?

2. Promote diversity in assessing spiritual transformation?

3. Carry your message of spiritual formation outside the church into the community and world?

4. Connect people in a worldwide network of prayer and ministry?

Pastors/Deacon Practices

1. Consistently shape your church disciples for growth and transformation?

2. Apply the concepts learned in spiritual formation - in your life, in your ministry?

3. Nurture personal attentiveness to God?

4. Encourage and practice fasting, submission, silence and humility toward God?

5. Experience intimate daily worship in a rhythm of prayer and study, silent reflection, solitude and community?

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March 19, 2015

Anthony Bailey

IRB Exemption 2101.031915: The Decline in the 21st Century Christian Church: Strengthening the Mission, Operation, and Commitment of the Local Church’s Spiritual Formation

Dear Anthony,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:

(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and
(ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon,
Psy.D. Professor, IRB
Chair Counseling
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