

THE REVITALIZATION PROCESS IN A SMALL RURAL  
PLATEAUED SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH

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## DEDICATION

First of all, I dedicate this work to the two churches I have served since I entered into full-time ministry in 1994. Though they are miles apart in location, personality, and size they have given me more than I could ever hope to give back. Ministry can be a burden for many. However, for me it has been a great joy.

Secondly, if it was not for the love, support, and encouragement of my family there is no way I would have made it through these past five years. Crissi, thank you for being there for me. I love you more than you can know. Zachary and Zoe, your dad is done with his paper. Now we can go outside and play! Mom, I told you I would finish. Thank you for encouraging me to stay at it.

## ABSTRACT

The Revitalization Process in a Small Rural Plateaued Southern Baptist Church

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New Zion Baptist Church is a small Southern Baptist church in rural Northeast Texas. The church has been stagnant for approximately three decades. This project is a record of the journey that the pastor and people of NZBC have travelled towards revitalization. The researcher began this project intent on implementing a strategic plan. However about half-way through the process, after evaluating the culture of NZBC, an intentional shift in methodology occurred. NZBC is a small church and therefore not a rationally structured, task driven, goal oriented organization. Instead it is a relational, biological and organic community. Therefore the process of revitalization was adjusted to reflect this reality. This researcher has concluded that in a world informed by quantum thought, small churches should embrace this orientation rather than change it. In doing so, they can become strategic mission posts in a postmodern world.

Abstract length: 143

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

New Zion Baptist Church<sup>1</sup> is a small Southern Baptist Church in rural Northeast Texas. The church is located in Fannin County which is approximately 75 miles north of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex.

Fannin county is a county in transition. According to census data, this area has increased in population 27% from 1990-2000. From 2000-2006 it has increased another 9% and if present trends continue the population will increase another 7% from 2006-2011.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the county in transition, but so is the greater culture. Researchers have argued that this present culture is a transitional one between modernism (the industrial age) and postmodernism (the information age). Towns and Stetzer write that this shift is a cultural reaction to the lies and unfulfilled promises of modernity.<sup>3</sup> Reggie McNeal adds,

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<sup>1</sup> This church will be referred to as NZBC for the duration of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> US Census Database, (US Census Bureau), <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (Demographic information; accessed October 18, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The lies of modernity are 1) Happiness is found in materialism 2) Fulfillment is found in progress 3) Man and Society is basically good and getting better as discussed in Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 2004), 153-160.

“Though (modernity as expressed in) secularism and nihilism have taken their best shot to kill God, they have lost. The postmodern world, governed by quantum physics and with its emphasis on relationships, is God’s end run around the modern world!”<sup>4</sup> They further suggest that the American institutional church rose to prominence in reaction to modernity and is not as effective in relation to the rising post modernity.

If the culture is transitioning, then it logically follows that the modern institutional church is facing change as well. Maston is surprisingly astute in his observation made for an earlier time:

It seems more or less natural for the church to accommodate itself to the world. . . when it is a relatively friendly world and particularly when it becomes strong in numbers and finances and has attained considerable prestige in the world. Such a church tends to use worldly standards as its measure of success. . . It frequently identifies itself with an order of society that is already passing away. This is particularly unfortunate when the church is in a revolutionary age such as this.<sup>5</sup>

If Reggie McNeal’s perspective is right then the church is at a precarious point in history because much of what has come to be called “church” is not going to last. This is due to several important developments. First of all, the modern church has been caught off guard. It did not see the postmodern shift coming. Therefore it does not know how to engage it. Instead, it is expending more time and resources (with diminishing returns) “in maintaining a church culture that is more suited for engaging a modern world while losing ground in a postmodern one.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 6.

<sup>5</sup> T.B. Maston, *The Christian, The Church and Contemporary Problems* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1968), 57-58

<sup>6</sup> Towns and Stetzer, 157-158.

With all the changes that are happening in the greater culture, the modern church, and of course, the county, it is completely understandable that NZBC senses change on the way even if the anxiety produced cannot be completely articulated and expressed.

In some ways they are excited about change. In other ways they are terrified by the prospect of it. This is a good church with a good heart and great potential. But, it is a struggling church, struggling to adapt to some of the changes it is facing inwardly and outwardly. Members are dying off. Some just struggle with apathy. New people are visiting but the church is not organized and prepared for growth and assimilation of new families.

Most of the Southern Baptist Churches in the area average less than 100 in attendance. In fact there is no church of any denomination that averages over 350. Three of the SBC churches average 250-300. In studying the statistical information of the area churches, the great majority of the churches have reached a plateau since the 1980's and many of them, for even longer. NZBC is one of those churches. They have never broken the 100 mark in average attendance for Sunday school. The average tenure for a pastor in the 57 years it has been in existence is less than three years. Only two pastors have stayed over five years. Both of them left and returned for a second tenure. This church has never baptized more than 20 people in a single year. Many years this church has only baptized one or two individuals. On average the church usually baptizes around five people per year and most of these are children.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Fannin Baptist Association Book of Reports* (Bonham, Texas), 1944-2006.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Methodology has changed little in over thirty years. The church has no constitution or by-laws. They do not have written policies and procedures in place for anything. They have done little if any long range planning. Many people in the county do not even know where the church is located. Those who do know where it is know little about the congregation.

Culturally, Fannin County is about a decade behind the Metroplex. It is also the third poorest county in the state. Nevertheless as the Metroplex grows, many rural counties such as this one are suddenly faced with an influx of people and problems. Once again, demographic data reveals that the state of Texas is now officially the fastest growing state in the nation. Therefore, growth and the benefits and problems that come with it are inevitable.

Over the last few years, there have been several factors that have contributed to a renewed sense of vitality for this church. A new highway has been completed less than one mile from the church. It has made the church facilities visible at many vantage points in the county. It has also made the church easier to access. Several years ago the church contemplated relocation but was unable to do so due to several factors. Later, land was purchased at the present spot. A new sanctuary and gymnasium were completed. The church had decided to partner with an upstart Christian Academy on the present site. Up until that point, there had never been a five day Christian School in Fannin County. A new pastor was called. He served this congregation before and has felt led by God to return to shepherd the congregation once again.

This researcher believes that God has great plans for NZBC. It is doubtful that Fannin County will be over taken by the Metroplex any time in the near future. However, it will be affected by urbanization. God may not want NZBC to be a megachurch but God wants it to be healthy, growing, and on mission with God. The aim of this project is to help NZBC become such a church. It should also help other small churches that are not growing, to become healthy churches as well.

The latest research states that one out of every four people in Fannin County have no church affiliation whatsoever. There are over 13,000 people living within a five mile radius of the church and over 20,000 people living within a ten mile radius.<sup>8</sup> If the ratio holds true, then there are 300-500 people that are possible pre-Christian or unchurched (not to mention those who are on church roles but have not had a personal relationship with the living Lord). NZBC must make a concerted effort to reach out to these people. The church must mobilize through discipleship those that are reached to be able to fulfill the Great Commission and Great Commandment.

When this researcher came on the field in 2006, he believed that several things needed to take place. First, NZBC needed to get its own house in order. Organization was a must. The church needed a constitution and by-laws. Policies and procedures needed to be put into place to aid the church in proper functioning.

He believed that there must be a discovery of priorities. Then the church needed to organize and allocate resources (money, people, and time) around those priorities. Whatever was done needed to be done with excellence. Along the way leaders needed to

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<sup>8</sup> *North American Mission Board*, "Center for Missional Research," <http://www.namb.net/> (accessed October 15, 2007).

be cultivated and those in the body needed to discover and utilize their gifts and abilities. The congregation should become a people of prayer and a people who worship God in spirit and truth. God's purpose for NZBC must not only be discovered but embraced with new fervor and commitment.

This researcher believed that the best way to accomplish all of this was through a strategic preparation process. So this research began to immediately work with the congregation to develop and implement a strategic plan that was designed to move the church three years down the road.

This pastor believed that all of this would enable New Zion to mobilize resources to maximize the ability to fulfill The Great Commission and Great Commandment.

Therefore, this pastor led the church to follow a procedure that combined the elements of several people's work: J.K. Milton, Frank Schmitt, Aubrey Malphurs, and Gary McIntosh.

#### *Review of the Literature*

There is a great deal of resources available to the church seeking to move forward successfully. For leadership training, John Maxwell and Ken Blanchard have written extensively on the issue of leadership. Obviously, healthy and effective leaders are necessary for any church or organization to move forward. This researcher has found a leadership model through the book *They Smell like Sheep* by Lynn Anderson that seems to fit his understanding of what leadership should be. Dr. Anderson writes, "When Godly, loving, gentle shepherds first build authentic relationships with their flocks and then rise

up and lead, sheep hungry for biblical leadership and wise guidance will willingly follow.”<sup>9</sup>

George Barna has made available statistical information and analysis that help a church understand modern trends within church and secular culture. Thom Rainer and Ed Stetzer have completed a large body of research that is helpful in understanding the revitalization process needed for declining congregations.

This researcher is indebted to the works of Aubrey Malphurs. His work has helped in understanding the necessity and implementation of strategic planning.

Organizational transformation is not an easy subject to tackle but Jim Collins, Thom Rainer, Rick Warren, Gene Mims, Leith Anderson, and Dan Sutherland have been beneficial to this researcher.

Ed Stetzer, Ken Hemphill, Elmer Towns, and Peter Wagner have all written books on church growth principles, generational issues, effective change, and successful churches. They have much wisdom to offer to any church facing the prospect of transformation and revitalization.

Lye Schaller, Gary McIntosh, and Anthony Pappas have written about the characteristics found in churches of various sizes. They have also helped this researcher focus on the unique DNA of small churches.

There is quite a bit of research that touts the benefits of small group ministry in bringing about personal and relational changes. These have been written by the likes of Peter Scazzero, Larry Crabb, Henry Cloud, and John Townsend. This researcher believes

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<sup>9</sup> Lynn Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep* (West Monroe, Louisiana: Howard Publishing, 1997), 27.

that small groups are the major factors in determining the direction and health of this congregation.

One of the most fascinating books out there is a book by Jane Vella called *Learning to Listen and Learning To Teach, The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*. Her research calls into question the effectiveness of the master/teacher monologue format that is utilized in most educational centers including churches. She offers a compelling argument to reexamine and replace these methods.

Relational leadership is another hot topic and one of great interest to this researcher. Authors like David Ferguson, Lynn Anderson, Eugene Peterson, and Heather Webb all have insightful contributions to the overall dialogue concerning church leadership, growth, and change. Erwin McManus and Andy Stanley have challenged this researcher in many ways.

Gary McIntosh, Lyle Schaller, Anthony Pappas, Glenn Wagner, and Robert Dale have been helpful to this writer. They helped him understand the unique struggles that small churches face and they clearly increased his awareness of the organic nature of the church.

### *Theoretical Basis*

Jesus only refers to the church twice in the Gospel accounts. Both accounts are found in the Gospel of Matthew. The first time occurs as Jesus enters into a discussion with his disciples about his identity to which Peter affirms Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. At this point, Jesus responds with well-known words. “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not overcome it.”<sup>10</sup>

The second reference is found just a few chapters later in relation to Jesus teaching on interpersonal conflict and correction:

If your brother sins against you, then go show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. If he will not listen, take one or two brothers along so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen to the church treat him as you would treat a pagan or a tax collector. (Matthew 18:5-7)

It is important to note that Jesus’ teaching centered around four ideas. First Jesus taught He would build (grow) the church. The second important idea was that the church belonged to Him. The third idea seems to be that healthy interpersonal relationships were important in the church. Last of all, He taught that dealing with sin was never to be taken lightly. Any church large or small that expects to be healthy and growing must ask and answer four questions in light of what Jesus says.

- 1) How does a church grow?
- 2) Who does the church belong to?
- 3) How should people relate?
- 4) How should sin be handled?

The rest of the New Testament offers some guidance on church leadership, structure, and function but it is far from a complete picture. In fact, it gives surprisingly little information in comparison to many of the topics that the Bible addresses. Therefore,

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:17-18. All Scripture references are taken from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1983) unless otherwise stated.

people in churches today (including leaders) need to develop a proper hermeneutic in relation to the Biblical passages that address church life and function. Malphurs discussion on the development of a proper “hermeneutic for church ministry”<sup>11</sup> is helpful at this point. He writes:

The Bible does not say as much about the topic as some might think. I believe this was because the Godhead desires for the church to have much freedom in how it conducts ministry. The book of Acts gives us some information as do some of Paul’s Epistles. The key hermeneutical question is how do we interpret the texts we do have on the first century church?”<sup>12</sup>

This researcher embraces the “principle approach”<sup>13</sup> in dealing with the Biblical passages that address church life and ministry. He holds to the conviction that the principles in Scripture are normative for people in every church, in every culture, and every point in history. Here are some examples that Malphurs offers:

1. Church beliefs and practices are based on Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
2. The church’s purpose is to glorify God ( Romans 15: 5-6, I Corinthians 6:20)
3. The church’s mission is to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20)
4. The church is the body of Christ in the world today (Mathew 16: 16-19, Romans 12: 5, Ephesians 3:10-11)
5. The church is to meet together regularly (Hebrew 10: 25)
6. The church is to discipline it’s people (Matthew 18:15-17, I Corinthians 5: 1-5)

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<sup>11</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2007), 62-73.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

7. The church is to celebrate it's ordinances (Matthew 26-26-29; 28:19, Acts 2:38, I Corinthians 11:23-26)
8. The church is to teach the Bible (2Timothy 4:2)
9. The church is to evangelize the lost (Matthew 28:19-20, Colossians 4:3-36)
10. The church is one body with many parts that function together in unity. (I Corinthians 12: 12-31, Romans 12:1-8, Ephesians 4: 11-16)
11. The church has Shepherd-leaders. (I Peter 5:14, I Timothy 3, Titus 1)

Therefore, a church is a group of people that have made a covenant together to be a church. There is self-awareness that finds expression in both a local and universal way. Real spiritual community that honors Christ can occur in many settings, such as Bible studies and interpersonal relationships but this does not necessarily constitute a church.

Rather, this means that people are *being* the church even if they are not gathering together, corporately to *do* church through the practice of five specific functions: worship, discipleship, service, ministry, and evangelism.<sup>14</sup> Towns and Stetzer offer a concise and helpful discussion on the definition of the church both local and universal.<sup>15</sup>

Another foundational conviction is that the church is an organism and an organization. Because a church is made up of a group of people, there will always be a degree of organization and structure. There is research that suggests that churches do not

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<sup>14</sup> Warren, Rick, *Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,, 1995), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Towns and Stetzer, 65-71.

grow because “they do not organize to fit the need of the next size of church.”<sup>16</sup> Carl George has hypothesized that as a church grows, “it must change organizationally.”<sup>17</sup> Yet he also warns, “Churches find each time they grow the quality lessens and they must scramble to implement new organizational structure.”<sup>18</sup> So, good organization is necessary. There are many good concepts that can be learned from the corporate world. And wise business practices are beneficial. But, the fact that a church is more than an organization is an important fact to remember.

Churches organize around many things. Sometimes they are clearly spelled out and understood. Sometimes they are just implied. For example, Schaller offers several “organizational assumptions”<sup>19</sup> that typically affect small churches like NZBC.

Rick Warren reminds leaders that churches needs “a system and a structure”<sup>20</sup> to balance the five purposes of a church. If this does not happen then a church usually ends up organizing around the personality, passion, giftedness, of its leader (s). Rainer and Geiger believe that simple churches (verses complex churches) are congregations that are

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<sup>16</sup> Womack, David, *The Pyramid Principle* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1977), 15-17.

<sup>17</sup> Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, NY: Revell, 1991), 42-43.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Small Protestant churches are affected organizationally by the following issues: 1) Churches organize around the scarcity of resources instead of abundance. 2) Small churches are just different. 3) They are not organized to welcome a flood of newcomers. 4) Modern technology and competition are two of the biggest issues affecting the future of small congregations 5) Small churches need to discover how to customize ministry. One size does not fit all 6) Pastoral tenure as cited in Schaller, Lyle E, *Small Congregation, Big Potential* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press) 14-19.

<sup>20</sup> Warren, 122.

designed around a straight forward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth.”<sup>21</sup> Dale suggests that churches are organized around dreams, beliefs, goals and deeds.<sup>22</sup>

There are two basic ideas that help to define church form and function. Leadership styles vary in relation to these perspectives. For the most part there are elements of both models and methodologies found in every church. However, most churches will emphasize one over the other and they are two very different processes. To understand both methodologies is important. In fact, Dale suggests that both perspectives must function together to create a balanced and healthy congregation.<sup>23</sup>

Using a right brain left brain analogy Dale points out that the church needs leadership that focuses on vision, imagination, intuition, and emotion (right brain functions) as well as logic, planning, and reasoning (left brain functions) to maintain relational and organizational health.<sup>24</sup> It is a good thing when they complement one another. There can be difficulties when they are at odds or one is emphasized more than the other.

On one end of the spectrum is the business or corporate model. At its extreme, this approach sees the church as foremost, an organization. Anthony Pappas writes “it is a thing created by managers, brought into being by management decisions and

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<sup>21</sup> Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2006), 60.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Dale, *To Dream Again* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), 78.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-61.

behaviors.”<sup>25</sup> This approach is “rational”, “structured”, “bureaucratic”, “task oriented” and “energy consuming.”<sup>26</sup> This is analogous to Dale’s left brain perspective.

On the other end of the spectrum is the biological model. Glenn Wagner defines it as a “relational”<sup>27</sup> model. Viola and Barna define it as “organic.”<sup>28</sup> The main idea is best described by Wagner who points out that most of the biblical metaphors used to describe the church (whatever it’s size) are “living” ones.<sup>29</sup> This is equivalent to Dale’s right brain approach.

Biology teaches that organisms utilize structure for healthy function and purposeful life. Sociology suggests that this is true of organizations.

However, wise leaders need to remember that there are two kinds of structure; formal and informal. These two kinds of structure are usually divided between “left brain, organizational, logical, and rational behavior/values and right brain, biological, relational, and intuitive ones.”<sup>30</sup>

Formal organization is usually created to do work and pursue tangible ministry and methodological goals. Informal organization usually develops for the purpose of

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<sup>25</sup> Pappas, Anthony G, *Entering the World of the Small Church*, (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2000), 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> Wagner, Glen E, *Escape from Church, Inc.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 194-195.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 2002), Preface.

<sup>29</sup> Wagner, 194-195.

<sup>30</sup> Dale, 80.

meeting needs. Sometimes these two types of structure complement each other. Sometimes they are in competition. If a church does not have clearly defined goals that flow from God's redemptive mission, a "kingdom dream"<sup>31</sup> in which to organize informally and formally then a church, by default, will "drift"<sup>32</sup> into organizational survival mode.

If a church has goals (stated or unstated), they usually fall into one of two categories; "survival"<sup>33</sup>(self-preservation and self propulsion) or "mission"<sup>34</sup> (God's redemptive purpose and Kingdom focus). Without intentionality, the default goal is always survival, or as Schaller describes it, the status quo.

Challenging a church's survival mode or status quo is never easy. Schaller puts the question this way," How does a person who is interested in change intervene in the ongoing life of an organization that is designed to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo?"<sup>35</sup> He then observes that the most wide open point for potential intervention is the widespread recognition of a crisis. "During times of great crisis, meaningful change can occur. The pastor (or some other leader) has the opportunity to become an "interventionist."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Dale, 33-34.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 63-65.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 63-65.

<sup>35</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *Create Your Own Future* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 22

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 25.

Social Scientists have observed a simple truth. Human beings create organizations and social structures. They are tools that are created intentionally or develop organically in response to some need or purpose. Though they may function efficiently and effectively at the beginning of their life cycle, over time as they grow, they have a tendency to become more and more complex. Also in time, these structures seem to take on lives of their own. The purpose of existence is usually forgotten or at least marginalized because more and more of the organization's resources and manpower are directed to maintaining the status quo. What once was a tool created by people to serve people becomes an entity that is eventually served by people. Even a bloated, self-serving, complex organization functions like a living entity! Emphasizing a complex corporate aspect of an organization while minimizing and neglecting the biological and organic nature of that same organization is perilous. One will always be subservient to the other.

McNeal and Wagner have argued convincingly that the corporate model though often applied with good intentions is not the best way to help a church be what God designed it to be. They suggest that the primary reason the North American church is faltering is the corporate mindset. Wagner writes "We often say that we want to bring people into a relationship with God, but how can a non-relational model effectively communicate what it means to be in a relationship? The corporate model currently favored in the American church opposes the very thing we say we want to create. Corporations were never designed to create community."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Wagner, 197.

Strong healthy churches *live* on a deeper level. This fact is quite evident in small churches, which may be efficient but not effective or effective but not efficient. Carl George recognized that even large growing churches must address “the complexity and loss of relational quality” (that comes with the need for more organization) by becoming more “people centered, ministry centered, and care centered” through small groups.<sup>38</sup>

There is no guarantee that logic, efficiency, organization, goals, input, resources, and leadership will create a healthy church. They may contribute to well-defined and well run organization but not necessarily, a healthy vibrant and growing church. Churches must be *on task* but if there is an over emphasis on the corporate/business model in modern church as so many have suggested, then there should be the recognition of a tendency to be more task driven rather than relationally driven. The biblical truth seems to be that behavior (or tasks) flow from relationship. “So if there is poor performance, then it is probably the relational aspect that is at fault.”<sup>39</sup>

In summary, churches are not called to be “primarily goal oriented” and “task driven” but “relationally oriented.” Small churches often reflect this tenacious truth because they “keep going and going, almost with an indescribable inertia, muddling through but enjoying (relational) life.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church For the Future* (Tarrytown, New York: Revell, 1991), 42-43.

<sup>39</sup> Wagner, 195.

<sup>40</sup> Pappas, 17.

Rainer and Rainer advocates reclaiming of what is “essential” to church life through a process that enhances the ability for a local church to experience organic (biological and relational) growth.<sup>41</sup>

Church function may improve with things like better leadership and a good action plan. But, if church members (leaders and laity) are not moving toward relational health and redemptive purpose, it will never become what it can be, even with better structure.

Attention must be focused on systemic problems. The researcher acknowledged earlier that real spiritual community that honors Christ can occur in many settings without necessarily constituting a church. However, it is a fundamental conviction that you cannot be a real church (organizationally) without experiencing real spiritual community (organically).

Larry Crabb writes:

I think this is what the writer to the Hebrews has in mind. He told us to never stop getting together with other Christians. And when we do get together to say and do things that stir a flame into a fire, to arouse the life God’s Spirit has placed within us so we can go through dark nights, or pleasant mornings, with our eyes fixed on unseen reality. He told us to think hard about what all of that means. But that is not what we have done. Instead we have found ways to *do church* even participate in small groups that do not require real connecting.

We have walked well-travelled roads, broad highways involving activity, organization, and ambition and built church buildings along the way. We have welcomed...the throngs of travelers who walk the roads with us and herded them into audiences that we call communities... But they are nothing of the sort. In real spiritual community people know each other; they relate in ways only God’s spirit makes possible.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Sam S Rainer, *Essential Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2006), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1999), xiv.

Therefore, relational leadership and relational health are the two main keys to spiritual health of this congregation and will facilitate growth as a by-product. Lyle Schaeller has stated “small churches are different” and of course, he is right.<sup>43</sup> What works in a larger church will not always work in a small rural congregation and visa versa. But, relational leadership and relational health can and should be emphasized in every congregation at some level.

The pastor is not called to do everything. In many churches expectations suggest otherwise. The pastor is called to equip the congregation for ministry. This equipping process can be understood with the concept of concentric relationships that the pastor has with those in his flock. He will relate with individuals in his congregation in various ways. But his goal should be to multiply ministry by investing in people at various levels of intimacy. Anderson puts it this way “The biblical design for spiritual leadership is summarized as shepherding, mentoring, and equipping.”<sup>44</sup>

However, “the overall health of any church or ministry depends primarily upon the emotional and spiritual health of its leadership.”<sup>45</sup> This pastor cannot lead to where he has not been himself.

It is the understanding of this researcher that the church culture must be conducive to moving people through a specific process of making disciples, maturing believers, and multiplying ministry. This occurs best in the context of dialogue and small

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<sup>43</sup> Lyle Schaller, *The Small Church is Different* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 36.

groups. David Benner suggests that dialogue is a necessary part of healthy spiritual formation when he writes:

It demands reciprocity and always involves synergy. In this regard dialogue can be thought of a collaborative creativity. Something new is created or discovered, this being a new understanding of some aspect of reality. When this involves genuinely meeting another person and ascertaining something of the truth of his or her life, this understanding holds transforming possibilities for all members of the dialogue.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, believers must come to understand that they exist in the context of a community not to do everything but do a few things with excellence, passion, and giftedness. Every member is uniquely gifted to edify the Body in some way, and each member is uniquely equipped for ministry to the world.

#### *Statement of Methodology*

This project is designed to be a help to those pastors and church leaders who serve in small, established, rural churches. Though it does not offer any formulas for spectacular growth, it offers an optimistic perspective that suggests that the small church is uniquely positioned for maximum strategic effectiveness in the postmodern culture if they will embrace a kingdom dream rather than a survival mode.

The leadership strategies that can be gleaned from this project were learned along the way. Observation, evaluation, and interpretation of the unique NZBC culture has been extremely valuable, even more so than vision casting and strategic planning. At first this was disconcerting to this pastor, but he discovered by accident while dealing with several disappointing setbacks, that the past properly presented was a powerful way to

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<sup>46</sup> David Benner, *Care of Souls* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1998), 132.

motivate the church into the future. Anthony Pappas affirmed what this researcher had stumbled upon when he wrote:

Effective leadership in a small church must be able to look forward. Such leaders must be able to perceive social and demographic trends. Such leaders must be able to register change within the congregation itself. Such leaders must be alert to new needs, opportunities, and hurts in their communities. But such leaders must not expect to persuade small church people to respond on the basis of a forward look. Rather such leaders can expect the forward look to be disorienting and debilitating to the congregation . . . The forward look is a function of leadership, not a function of the whole body of the small church. Having looked forward effective leaders have only just begun. They must now step back into the world history and heritage, memory and tradition. They must scan the past for values and behaviors that are appropriate for the future. Then they must cultivate and nurture. By utilizing the backward look of the congregation, they lead forward.<sup>47</sup>

This thesis project is a partial record of the ongoing revitalization process at NZBC. Each chapter will deal with different aspects of that journey thus far.

Chapter one provides an overview of the project. Chapter two presents several underlying realities that have shaped the revitalization process at NZBC. These realities are as follows. The culture is changing. The modern church is facing change. The local church is designed by God to be an organized spiritual community. NZBC is a small church. Chapter three follows with the story of NZBC's history.

Chapter four describes the process that was developed. Initially, this researcher proposed a four step-process by combining elements from several sources. J.K. Milton is a Director of Missions for the Bluebonnet Association in New Braunfels, Texas. One year before the writer became pastor of NZBC; Milton came and did a strategic planning

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<sup>47</sup> Pappas, 79-80.

session for the Fannin Baptist Association. From the notes of that session he wrote “to prepare strategically the process must have five phases and answers six questions.”<sup>48</sup>

Dr. Frank Schmitt, who is a professor at Liberty University, developed a process that he presents in his class CLED 620. In it, he provides an eleven step process.<sup>49</sup>

Aubrey Malphurs offers up another outline for strategic planning. Using the illustration of a ship being launched he offers a three part strategy. Here is a summary of that process.<sup>50</sup>

1. Preparing to sail!
  - a. Preparing the boat
  - b. Preparing the crew
  - c. Laying the foundation
2. Setting the course!
  - a. Discover core values
  - b. Develop a mission

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<sup>48</sup> The five phases include preparation, planning, organization, resourcing, and implementation. The six questions include: Why are we? Who are we? How are we? Where are we going? How do we get there? By J.K Milton in a "Strategic Planning Session," speech delivered to Fannin Baptist Association, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> The twelve step process is as follows: The leadership vision, congregational preparation and committee selection, evaluation/creation of mission statement based on church objectives and core values, church analysis, community analysis, determination of needs and priorities, development of a plan, strategy development, goals and action plans, presentation of plan by committee, implementation and evaluation of plan as spelled out in Frank J. Schmitt's *Syllabus for CLED 620* (Lynchburg, VA).

<sup>50</sup> A further explanation of this process which includes many of the same elements that the other experts discuss can be found in Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2005).

- c. Create a vision
  - d. Introduce a strategy
  - e. Discover who we can reach and influence
  - f. Develop mature disciples
  - g. Build a dream team
  - h. What is the ministry setting and presence
3. Launching the boat!
- a. Strategic implementation
  - b. Strategic evaluation.

Using information gleaned from the three experts mentioned above, this researcher initially developed a four stage process. Due to some reassessment and redirection that occurred in 2009, a fifth stage was added. Here is that process.

#### A Time of Preparation

This is the section that records the personal preparation of the pastor and the church preparation that occurred. The pastor prayed and fasted as he sought God's vision for his life in relation to leading the church. Then the pastor asked the church to pray and each member to ponder the future of the church. Through a series of sermons, the pastor communicated the vision for a time period of five months. It was during this time that a demographic study was done of the community. The pastor also researched the statistical information on NZBC.

### A Time of Celebration

Small churches move forward best if they can celebrate the past. So, during this time a church history was completed. A new sanctuary was completed in 2006, so there was a day of dedication that was planned and promoted.

### A Time of Introspection

The church was then asked to vote formally to enter into the process of strategic planning. A Saturday was set aside in which the WHOLE church was invited to a planning session. That session allowed the church to discover core values, develop a mission statement, and determine priorities with the use of what Malphurs calls “brainstorming, storyboarding, 1-10 scale, and consensus.”<sup>51</sup> Along the way, a Constitution and By-Laws team was commissioned to research, create, and present a governing document to the church.

### A Time of Redirection

At first the initial strategy that had been adopted worked well. By 2009, it was clear that something was wrong. Attendance was dropping. Financial support was on the decline. Discontent was on the rise. So the pastor took a step back and began to analyze what went wrong.

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<sup>51</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2005), 41.

### A Time of Application

After a time of redirection, there was a shift in this pastor's thinking. A focus on church growth was replaced by a focus on church health. A rational approach to revitalization gave way to a relational approach. The priority focus shifted from organizational change to organic change. Kingdom thinking replaced church thinking.

### A Time of Evaluation

This chapter concludes with some observations cultivated out of hindsight. Then it presents some challenges that NZBC faces in the days ahead. Finally, it concludes with some recommendations in direction.

### *Statement of Limitations*

Obviously, there is no guarantee that a church will grow. There are a multitude of factors which contribute to the success or failure of a church. Spiritual, sociological, emotional, and organizational issues are all involved. Therefore, there is no one size fits all formula that is applicable to all churches everywhere. Each church has its own personality, history, struggles, and dreams. Any good leader recognizes this and will seek a customized vision to fit the context.

However, there are basic principles that are applicable in every setting. Hopefully, the narrative of the journey that constitutes the core of this project will be helpful to other small church leaders. Yet, this is not a guaranteed outcome. However, this pastor has been approached by the Director of Missions in the Fannin Baptist association with the

idea of finding a way to use this information to help small local churches and their leaders.

It must not be overlooked that church health and vitality can and should be measured in different ways. Baptisms, attendance, effective programs, and financial strength are all typical factors used to measure growth. But there are other measurements that are a little more difficult to quantify. Personal transformation and relational reformation are harder to gauge but probably a better picture of health. The only appropriate measuring stick for these indicators is time.

About two-thirds of the way through the compilation of this project, a seismic shift occurred with the heart of this pastor which led to a reevaluation and redirection. If small church leaders are looking for a well structured and rational plan to propel their congregations toward growth, they will be disappointed in this project. If they are looking for affirmation that this is not necessarily a bad thing, and that the way forward may take a meandering path rather than a straight one, this project may be of some value.

Attempting to formulate a cohesive plan that fits the personality and needs of NZBC has not been an easy task. Gene Mims offers good reminder that any process is just a process unless it is spirit-led and kingdom focused. In other words “The kingdom of God in it simplest form is the reign of Jesus Christ as Lord and King in the lives of people. It is the Holy Spirit working in, through, and around people in such a way that they actually live and do the will of God.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Gene Mims, *The Kingdom Focused Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishing, 2003), 40.

Though it has been difficult, multiple lessons have been learned. Without a doubt, there is more to learn and discover. But, the people that make up NZBC finally seem to be headed in the right direction. What the future holds is anyone's guess. What follows is only a partial record of the journey so far and the realities that have shaped the process to this point in time.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE REALITIES THAT HAVE SHAPED THIS PROCESS

#### *The Culture is Changing*

Cultures always change. Barna says “cultures reinvent themselves every three to five years.”<sup>1</sup> The dominate source of cultural impact for the modern world over the past five centuries is a global perspective called modernity. It was heralded as the liberation of humankind. It signaled a shift from the Dark Ages into an Age of Enlightenment. It resulted from a development of new technology, expanded travel, commerce, and communication.<sup>2</sup> New theories and discoveries that developed out of the scientific method gave way to a rational view of all reality. What could be seen, touched, and counted could be explained. “The modern world was bent on demystifying everything. Modernity vigorously studied the universe to wring from it its secrets and expose its inner mechanisms. Human reason was exalted and education became the religion of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Modernity has always challenged the idea of the existence of God and what his role in the universe really was. If He (She, or It) existed at all, then that existence was

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<sup>1</sup> George Barna, *The Second Coming Of The Church* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1998), 8.

<sup>2</sup> McNeal, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

beyond the scope of the verifiable and therefore irrelevant to the real world. Modernity “put God in a corner by taking Him systematically out of circulation” (that is out of the marketplace of ideas) and increasingly “relegated Him to the realm of religious dogma and ceremony.”<sup>4</sup>

Millard Erickson has a helpful explanation of the core tenets of modernism and the cultural expressions that have resulted. He presents nine basic beliefs that up until recently influenced the modern approach to life.<sup>5</sup>

However modernism is giving way to a new era called post-modernism. Towns and Stetzer call the shift a radical change.<sup>6</sup> McNeal calls the change a new epoch in human history.<sup>7</sup> Just as new theories and discoveries produced a rational view of reality in the modern age, new discoveries and theories are producing a “quantum”<sup>8</sup> perspective of reality in this emerging one.

Not all areas are affected in the same way. Urban centers away from the Bible belt are more affected than those urban centers within the Bible belt. Rural and suburban areas are affected differently than the inner city. Multicultural populations experience the shift

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>5</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Post-modernizing the Faith: Evangelical Response to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 17-19.

<sup>6</sup> Towns and Stetzer, 155.

<sup>7</sup> McNeal, 5.

<sup>8</sup> A quantum perspective means that we must look at the world in a new way. For the past 100 years physicists and other scientists have been moving past Newtonian mechanics to a new paradigm informed by quantum physics. Just as Newtonian and Darwinian theories effected our perception (and interpretation) of reality, the same thing is occurring with quantum thinking according to Vella, Jane. *Learning To Listen, Learning To Teach* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 26-32.

more than areas that are more homogeneous. The average age in a certain regions also makes a difference.

In many areas of this country people still live in the same way as their parents before them. However, “even though the societal shift has not yet made its fullest and deepest impact many people can sense the meteorite of cultural change moving their way. They can see it taking place in their children’s lives-how they think and reason, how they view life, and how they act differently.”<sup>9</sup>

Cultural observers note that postmodernism is not just a shift in knowledge (informed by quantum physics) but a reaction to the failure of modernism to produce all that it promised. In fact, Simpson adds that the rise of industrial and commercial civilization (modernism) actually produces an emptiness that results from the loss of organic community.

Cultural postmodernism has discarded the lies of modernity and started looking elsewhere for sufficient answers to the important questions of life. In other words, as people have lost hope in the ideals of the Enlightenment and post-modernity has increasingly becoming the prevailing worldview, it fills in the gaps that modernity has ignored or refused to address.

Postmodern thought does not fit into a neat little package and the cultural shift that is occurring is not occurring all at once in a unilateral way. However, there are six

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<sup>9</sup> Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publisher, 2006), 7-8.

general trends that are affecting the culture at various levels.<sup>10</sup> Post-modern people value:

1. Relationship over Task
2. Journey over Destination
3. Authenticity over Excellence
4. Experience over Proposition
5. Mystery over Solution
6. Diversity over Uniformity

There is a final observation that has been made about the postmodern culture. The rejection of modernism is terrifying to many. There are some in denial of the fact that the shift is occurring. But, those that have taken the time to study its effects have come to believe that it offers unprecedented opportunity for the communication of the Gospel.

This is primarily because many elements of this culture were present in the first century. That culture was an extremely pluralistic society yet it was conducive to the spread of Christianity not just as a belief system but as a movement.<sup>11</sup> If Jesus and His followers were able to penetrate the culture of that day, then there is hope for this one. However, if that is to happen then the modern church needs to take a good hard look at itself.

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<sup>10</sup> Towns and Stetzer, 15.

<sup>11</sup> McNeal, 16-19, 61.

*The Modern Church is facing Change*

It appears that the “North American church culture” is dying and NZBC (along with most other churches) have been overwhelmingly influenced by that culture. Of course the church of Jesus Christ will not die and the Church will continue to thrive until the Second Coming.<sup>12</sup> The Bible makes that abundantly clear. Even though the Church will continue to exist, local congregations can and do cease to exist for various reasons.

Yet, there is a big difference between the culture of a local church (language, acceptable behavior, thought patterns, traditions, musical style, etc.) and the church itself. But in modern church life, they have become increasingly harder and harder to separate.

If the Western church has “appropriated the modern worldview”<sup>13</sup> as some believe and “it is living off of the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order”<sup>14</sup> then, in the face of postmodernism many churches are in trouble unless they are willing to respond to the postmodern shift in an “appropriate”<sup>15</sup> way. If the world is in a new era as has been suggested, then “the postmodern world will demand a new church expression just as did the rise of the modern world.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Luke 16:17-19.

<sup>13</sup> Harry L. Poe, “Making the Most of Post Modernity” *Journey of the Academy for Evangelism* 13 (1997-1998): 67.

<sup>14</sup> McNeal, 1.

<sup>15</sup> There four possible approaches to the vast cultural changes that churches can take. The church can ignore, attack, adopt, or contextualize/incarnate the unchanging message of the gospel to an ever changing culture as cited by Towns and Stetzer, 160-164.

<sup>16</sup> McNeal, 5.

The church learned to communicate the timeless truths of the gospel to generations of people that were ensnared by modernism. But it took time. The Reformation was the natural (or maybe supernatural) by-product of The Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> Over time, many churches and the message they proclaimed have absorbed the worldview they worked so hard to challenge.<sup>18</sup>

Now, the North American church culture unfortunately reflects the materialism, rationalism, intellectualism, naturalism, and secularism of the modern era. The greatest threat to the church according to Chuck Colson “comes not from persecution but from the spirit of the age. The spirit of the age does not break down church doors like Communist agents or militant Muslims. It drifts into the side window, largely unnoticed like the air that we breathe. We get accustomed to it, breath by breath, until we do not even recognize its stench.”<sup>19</sup>

Modern, Newtonian, and rationalistic thinking has permeated the church culture. “Not only do we not need God to explain the universe, we do not need God to operate the church. Many operate like machines, with church leaders serving as mechanics. God does not need to show up to get done what is being done.”<sup>20</sup>

As modernism has continued to permeate the church, many of her members have become practical atheists. In other words, as Wood writes, the church is filled with

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> Josh McDowell and Thomas Williams, *The Relational Word* (Holiday City, FL: Green Key Books, 2006), 11.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Being the Body* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 261.

<sup>20</sup> McNeal, 6.

people who have “gladly reduce Christian faith to sociology or culture or personality development.”<sup>21</sup>

McNeal continues “Just when the church adopted a business model, the culture went looking for God. Just when the church adopted strategic planning (linear and Newtonian) the universe shifted to preparedness (loopy and quantum). Just when the church began building recreation space, the culture began a search for sacred space.”<sup>22</sup>

It is predicted that the final blow for many churches will occur “when the money runs out” or when “three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.”<sup>23</sup> The organizations may still meet and they still have some sort of function. But increasingly many so called churches are adopting a bunker mentality to stave off the effects of change in the culture at large. As Colson explains, “Many Christians are discouraged by a sense that the culture wars are being lost.” They speak longingly from a selective memory of better days as “they withdraw altogether, pulling back to enjoy like minded fellowship in Christian enclaves.”<sup>24</sup> In doing so, they either develop a type of spiritual dementia or they trade kingdom vision for a dream of church survival. In other words, they forget the reason they exist or they are so focused on survival that kingdom purpose is marginalized or completely replaced.

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<sup>21</sup> Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Colson and Vaughn, 269.

There is ample research that shows that the American Church is stagnate and its influence is declining. Rainer and Rainer cite seven symptoms that show a church is on life support: doctrinal dilution, loss of evangelistic passion, lack of relevance, few outwardly focused ministries, conflict over personal Preference, the priority of Comfort, and Biblical Illiteracy.<sup>25</sup>

Some say that this is because the church is not reaching the next generation. Rodney Stark has offered research that suggests this is not necessarily the case. He writes “in every national survey of church attendance ever done, young people have always been less likely to attend church than older people.” He says that the data suggests that they are not defecting from church, they are just sleeping in!” That they have not defected is obvious from the fact that a little bit later in life when they have married and especially after children arrive they become more regular attendees. This happens every generation.”<sup>26</sup> However, his research does conclude that though “religion is not on the way out, it is far less influential and universal than it used to be.”<sup>27</sup>

The biggest concern among researchers is the loss of influence in the culture. “Local churches are having trouble relating to their local community and the younger generation. While some peg this irrelevance as the major underlying factor of declining

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<sup>25</sup> Rainer and Rainer, 17-19.

<sup>26</sup> Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008), 9-10, 183.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

churches, we believe that it is merely symptomatic of a much greater issue: the church is no longer essential to people's lives."<sup>28</sup>

Reggie McNeal knows the church is not dying but he does believe that "the unique culture in North America that has come to be called church is a vestige of the original movement. It is an institutional expression of religion that is part a civil religion and in part club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs."<sup>29</sup>

Viola and Barna say that the modern institutional church is ceasing to become an expression of authentic Christianity because of the systemic problems it has developed over time. They have suggested that the "church in its contemporary and institutional form has neither a biblical or historical right to function as it does." They argue on "theological, historical, and pragmatic grounds that the normative practices of the first century church were solidly grounded in timeless principles and teachings of the New Testament. By contrast, a great number of practices in many churches today are not."<sup>30</sup> They call for a return back to an "organic expression of church which is simply a church that is born out of spiritual life instead of constructed by human institutions and held together by religious programs."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rainer and Rainer, 8.

<sup>29</sup> McNeal, 1.

<sup>30</sup> George Barna and Viola Frank, *Pagan Christianity* (Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale, 2008), xix-xx.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

These critiques echo the Kierkegardian perspective without the biting satire and distain when he wrote, "Thou does not take part in treating God as a fool by calling that (the institutional expression of Christendom) the Christianity of the New Testament, which is not the Christianity of the New Testament."<sup>32</sup>

Malphurs also recognized the sad state of the American church and the need for change to occur. He believes, much like Barna and Viola, that the "the modern church is obligated to follow only the principles, not necessarily the patterns and practices of the early church. Therefore, he affirms that the principles of Scripture are normative and for all churches everywhere."<sup>33</sup> This, he suggests is what the church has lost and needs to recover.

All of these authors recognize a decline. Take note. The decline is tied mostly to involvement in institutional church life and its impact in relation to the emerging culture. Involvement in church life is what Stark see as a temporary life stage. Rainer and Rainer rightly observe that the next generation does not see the church as essential to life and faith.

One culture watcher believes that people are leaving the church "not because they are losing their faith but because they want to preserve it."<sup>34</sup> Another suggests that the church is far too easily overlooked. From his perspective, a true vibrant, Spirit directed, Christ-centered, kingdom focused, and people caring church will either "cause

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<sup>32</sup> Soren Kierkegard, *Attack Upon Christendom* (Boston, MA: Princeton University Press, 1944), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *A New Kind of Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2007), 71-72.

<sup>34</sup> McNeal, 4.

non-believers to be repulsed or attracted. But it will not be ignored.”<sup>35</sup> Viola and Barna’s research strongly suggests that much of what occurs in the modern institutional church stifles much of the organic expression of faith.<sup>36</sup>

McDowell and Williams believe “that the modern age has influenced the church with its emphasis on reason, categories, and systems” to present the truth of God (The Bible) as just another system “of religious dogma rather than an introduction to the one true God communicating his intense love and desire for relationships.”<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, evangelical churches in America that are firmly rooted in modernity “sit in culture that has moved beyond modern ideas.”<sup>38</sup> The language, music, and worldview of the culture have changed. The success or failure of local churches is not dependant on the continuation of modernity or the embrace of post-modernity.

Rather, what matters is the whether or not each local church is willing to accept the challenge of reaching people with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in whatever culture they find themselves. Therefore “churches need to decide whether or not the can be content to be “outposts of modernity in a new age”<sup>39</sup> or embrace the challenge of becoming something else entirely. The local church must become a cross-cultural missionary sending and equipping organization in an increasingly postmodern mission field.

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<sup>35</sup> Wagner, 236.

<sup>36</sup> Barna and Viola, 263.

<sup>37</sup> McDowell and Williams, 11-12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>39</sup> Towns and Stetzer, 155.

*Churches Were Created to be Organized Spiritual Communities*

Unhealthy systemic patterns are common in churches like NZBC; they destroy the ability of church members to develop significant and positive relationships. Waggoner says that if leaders are going to help their churches grow, they must help these churches face these destructive patterns by modeling “healthy relationships that will exemplify integrity, respect, humility, and brotherly love.”<sup>40</sup>

Crabb writes, “Churches are rarely true communities. More often than not they are social machines that run smoothly for awhile, break down, then are fixed so they run smoothly again or just noisily along as best they can.”<sup>41</sup> He believes that the interactions between people in these organizations “rarely create community—they are more often substitute for it.”<sup>42</sup>

Good organization is a component of NZBC’s health. It is not the key. Change needs to occur in methodology but that will only be best if it is done incrementally, relationally, and in the context of sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. The timeline for change will be measured in terms of years not months.

Churches like NZBC are not Missional in form and function. This is not because they do not have the capacity. Instead, they have lost sight of what it means to be

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<sup>40</sup> Brad Waggoner, *The Shape Of Faith To Come*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2008), 238.

<sup>41</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place On Earth*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1999), xiv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

Missional. The church can still become what God had uniquely equipped and designed it to be, it just needs to be reminded of the “original dream that brought it into existence.”<sup>43</sup>

As stated earlier, NZBC has never had a constitution or by-laws. They have had a church covenant but it has been forgotten over the years. But, they have been organized. There is no mistake about that. Since 1944, NZBC has been organized around three things: meetings, family, and personality.

From the 1950s to the present, the church has consistently had a full-time pastor, Sunday and Wednesday services, and Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, Revivals, and fifth Sunday singings (up until 2006) were regularly encouraged and supported. Historically, these things have helped to define themselves as a congregation and enabled them to derived satisfaction and comfort in their identity as NZBC.

Also, as with small rural churches everywhere up until the 70s-80s, NZBC was a hub of community and family activities. Church growth experts have often pointed out that loyalty to a certain congregation in the past was based on location and relational ties. People attended church because that is what they were supposed to do. They usually attended the church closest to where they lived and they did so as a family.

Finally, church life was influenced by strong personalities and family dynamics more than is often acknowledged. There is an interesting observation this researcher had made on multiple conversations with people in this community. When they find out what church this researcher serves, their response is always tempered with a reaction (positive and negative) to individuals and families that attend. This determines whether or nor their response is favorable or not. It is also interesting how their perception of this

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<sup>43</sup> Dale, 13.

church is colored by residual knowledge of past families and personalities that are no longer there.

*NZBC is a Small Church*

Using the McIntosh typology (15-200), NZBC is a small church. This expression of church life is the predominate one in America. According to his research, 50% of Protestant churches in this country average less than 100. 80% of these churches average less than 200.<sup>44</sup>

McIntosh describes the small church “DNA”<sup>45</sup> in the following manner: They are relational in orientation. They usually are single celled in structure. The leadership resides in key families. The leadership style that will function best in this setting is the relational/lover. Decisions are made by the congregation and driven by the precedence of history. These churches are lead by a single staff member and/or a bi-vocational leader. Change occurs from the bottom up through key people. Growth occurs through attraction and existing relationships.

Lyle Schaller defines a small church as a church that averages 125 or less in a typical worship service. His research revealed that 2/3 of American Protestant congregations belonged in this category.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gary L McIntosh. *Taking Your Church to the Next Level* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2009), 131.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.

<sup>46</sup> Lyle Schaller, *Small Congregation Big Potential* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 23-25.

NZBC would rate on these templates as a small except in the area of staff.<sup>47</sup> When this researcher came to the church, he was the only paid staff. However, within two years a part-time secretary was hired as well as a part-time music and youth minister.

Looking back, the hires were premature and in all honesty, unsustainable considering the economic developments that have taken place. By the fall of 2009, the secretary position became a voluntary one and the other staff member chose to reduce responsibilities and accept less pay.

Though small churches are well known for being change resistant, small churches are not immune to the societal shift that is occurring. They may not die easily but if the researchers are right, many will still die (not because they are small but they are outposts of modernity) unless they change. It may just take a little longer. “A continuing failure to engage the culture will doom any church into a death spiral as the members of the modern church culture die off.”<sup>48</sup>

However, the evidence suggests that healthy small churches may have some advantages over larger congregations. This is primarily because they are a unique sub-culture within modern church culture. Though small churches in America are affected by modernity, they are just as influenced by other factors. The characteristics that have developed over time have possibly set them up to be especially suited for a postmodern missionary assignment.

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<sup>47</sup> Gary McIntosh. *One Size Does Not Fit All* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming Revell, 1999), 148-149.

<sup>48</sup> McNeal, 53.

Drawing a parallel between churches and societies, Pappas offers a church model that he believes expresses the balance between the organic/organizational nature of the small church. The two Biblical expressions he refers to are the “People of God” and the “Body of Christ”. There are others like the “bride of Christ”, “members of God’s household” and a “chosen priesthood”. All point to a very relational oriented community.

Suggesting that a business model does not do justice to the organic form and function of the church, He offers up the idea of a “folk society or tribe.”<sup>49</sup> Pappas believes that this helps to offer a satisfactory explanation of the roles, commitment, social interconnections, and focus of the under appreciated small church culture.

Lewis Simpson suggests that the influence of modernism, actually contributes to the loss of “kinship, custom, tradition, and myth”<sup>50</sup> which are vital to the health of organic community. However, small rural churches exist in such a way that they are at least “partially immune to the materialism that is so destructive to much of Western religion and culture.”<sup>51</sup>

Pappas believes that small churches have an exciting future as long as they are willing to “coordinate with God’s redemptive purpose.”<sup>52</sup> God wants NZBC to be a

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<sup>49</sup> Pappas, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis P. Simpson, *The Brazen Face of History: Studies in Literary Consciousness in America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980), 76.

<sup>51</sup> Wood, 84.

<sup>52</sup> Small churches are mission outposts in a needy world. Each one has great potential. They proclaim Gospel in an indigenous setting. They are relational and diverse. These churches are a conduit of infectious joy and blessing. They connect people to God and each other in very personalized way. If they can celebrate the spirit of their heritage and yet distinguish between the power and purposes of God and the vehicles of a previous day then they have a glorious future as cited in Pappas, chapter 11.

healthy and growing church. In reality this may have little to do with size! If NZBC could become what God designed it to be, like other small churches (who make up the majority of churches in America) they could become effective expressions of church life for the next generation. Size has never been the Biblical standard of God's blessing. "Divine approval is qualitative not quantitative."<sup>53</sup> To be successful every church, no matter what the size, will only find renewed life when it learns to give itself for the world even as Christ did.

Small churches are not without problems. McManus writes: "When you come to God, you discover that He is perfect. When you come to Christian community, you discover that God's people are not. The Christian community is not a place without interpersonal crisis or challenges. In some sense we are all hypocrites in transition. We are all working it out."<sup>54</sup>

However, they may have more opportunity and willingness to embrace an organic relational model than many larger churches. All churches must retool to effectively reach the culture. Maybe, God has uniquely outfitted the small church with the organizational, relational, and spiritual DNA to do just that. The evidence suggests that the small church may actually have what it takes to be on the cutting edge of cultural impact.

Though dysfunction is present in many congregations, most are tenacious and resilient. They weather the changes around them by resisting change within. They can be extremely frustrating to deal with. Lee is wise on this point when he writes, "The church

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<sup>53</sup> G. Avery Lee, *What is Right with the Church?* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1967), 94.

<sup>54</sup> Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2001), 170.

does not represent unchanging certainty. Rather the church represents an open-ended search for God's will and the application of His eternal truth to our lives. The only unchanging certainty the church has is the reality of God.”<sup>55</sup>

Pappas has written that there are six challenges that small churches must address if they are to become healthy. They are traditionalism, congeniality, club mentality, conflict management, negative self-perception, and finances.<sup>56</sup>

A healthy small church will have spiritual vitality, a sense of calling, a common life, a mission focus, and good leadership development.<sup>57</sup>

This writer believes that it is vital for churches to recognize these realities. Make no mistake; the “church culture” that exists in most churches has made a tremendous impact on the hearts and lives of people in the past. However, they are becoming increasingly less and less effective in the present.

The main emphasis for churches, whether large or small, is not to embrace the culture and in the process dilute the message of the Gospel. They must seek to understand both the culture inside the church and the culture outside the church. The church must then seek to understand the greater culture in an effort to communicate the Gospel clearly in a language that can be understood. They must care for people in the name of Jesus in authentic ways. They must work very hard to clear the path for people to be converted to Christ instead of a particular expression of church life, even small church life.

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<sup>55</sup> Lee , 74.

<sup>56</sup> Pappas, 7.

<sup>57</sup> Pappas, 95-105.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE STORY OF NEW ZION BAPTIST CHURCH

In 1847, Levi C. Roberts wrote a letter to *The Banner and Pioneer* which was reproduced in the *Tennessee Baptist*. In that letter he wrote, “The people are crowding into Texas from every part of the union. Cottages are springing up in every direction. There is a lamentable destitution of religious influence all over the country. There are few ministers of the gospel and a majority of them are anything but missionary in effort or sentiment.”<sup>1</sup>

By 1860, there were approximately five hundred Baptist churches in Texas. These churches organized into twenty-four district associations and two conventions. By the late 1800s a church had been organized north of Ector, Texas. It was first called Raw Hide Baptist Church and later, Cottonwood Baptist Church. However by 1886, it was called Mount Zion Baptist Church because the records reveal that a “Mount Zion Baptist church near Savoy, Texas” was the place where a meeting of the Sister Grove Association (which was originally organized in 1853) occurred.

In this meeting a process began that resulted in the birth of a new association that was organized along county lines. It was called The Fannin Missionary Baptist Association and it was formed in 1888. Mount Zion became inactive around 1927 and for

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. Carroll, *A History of Texas Baptists* (Dallas, Texas: Baptist Standard Publishing, 1923), 299-300.

the next 25 years there was no Baptist church located between Ector and the Red River until 1944.

Some of the earliest churches in the county included the First United Methodist Church of Bonham (1844), Vineyard Grove Baptist Church (1847), and First Baptist Church of Bonham (1852). The county has remained overwhelmingly Protestant since that time.<sup>2</sup> In fact by 1900, it was said of the residents of Fannin County, Texas:

People take hold of religion with zeal not to be found in the old states. Nearly all the spare time of the mass of the people is given to religious matters in some shape or form. Church service, Sunday schools, temperance movements, and orders of religious inclination, or moral tenderness, claim the attention of the great majority of the people during their rest from the callings of every day life. In fact Fannin County is essentially religious, not the wolf in sheep's clothing kind, but moral, worshipping, church going Christians. The stranger who comes here is soon impressed with the truth of this statement, and his admission to society, to some extent depends upon his religious inclination, it is not to be understood that there are no anti-church people in the county, for there are and many of whom are excellent people, but perhaps the majority are either members of some church or religiously inclined.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that from the earliest beginnings of organized religious work, Texas Baptists placed an emphasis on Sunday Schools. There were difficulties of course. Houses of worship were almost nonexistent. "The buildings that were available were shared spaces. In those early days it was rare that there were more than four denominations in any one community. The community school houses were used for all religious services."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.texasgeneology.org/Fannin> (accessed November 21, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.texasgeneology.org/Fannin>, (accessed November 15, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Carroll, 262.

New Zion, as it is now called, had its genesis in various Sunday Schools organized at different times in what was known as the Old Caney schoolhouse and later in the New Fulp schoolhouse (on the present site of NZBC). But, none of them ever lasted over six to nine months and would usually have to be reorganized during the summer. One former member, Ann Ray Rinker reflected on those early days:

Mama was one of two teachers in the New Fulp Schoolhouse back then. Before the church was organized, Sunday services were held in the school auditorium. I remember a brightly colored stage curtain covered with advertisements. The one I remember the most had 'H.E. Butts Grocery' on it. I remember Mr. Butts as a nice man who gave us candy! It must have been a very distracting curtain because I do not remember many church activities that went on in front of it.<sup>5</sup>

On July 16, 1944, a small group of believers voted to organize as a church at the close of a revival being held in the schoolhouse. James Batson, the Pastor of Ector Baptist Church moderated that meeting and thirty-two people were received into the congregation that day.

Some wanted the church to be named Mount Zion, others wanted to be called New Fulp. After some discussion, a compromise was made and the church became New Zion.

The annual meeting of the Fannin County Baptist Association met at the Vineyard Grove Baptist Church in Windom, Texas October 19-20, 1944 where a petitionary letter was read by Mr. Hez Ray from the New Zion Church. A motion was carried that messengers from that church be seated and a committee was appointed to further investigate the doctrine and practices of the New Zion Baptist Church.

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Ray Rinker, to Rex Ray, A Collection of Church Memories.

There have been twenty-one preachers in the history of the church. Some of the preachers, who were once members of the old Mount Zion Church, were Troy L. Denton, Dee Fleming, Roy Fleming, Clint M. Hundly, Oby Nelson, David W. Ray, Rex Ray, and Roy Vanhoove.

Members of New Zion who had also been members of Mount Zion were: Mrs. Floyd Smith Boyer; Mrs. Lena Price Fleming; Claude E. and Price (Ray) Hicks; Mrs. Myrtle Buchum Johnson; Mr. & Mrs. Don F. Ray; Mr. & Mrs. Hez F. Ray; and Miss Ora Smith.

Details of New Zion's history are sketchy between 1940 and 1948 due to the impact of World War II. But there are a few details that are known. In 1948 the church bought an army surplus building from Camp Maxey (North of Paris Texas). It was torn down, removed, and then rebuilt on the present church site, where it is still standing today.

The first four pastors of the church were named Bernard Beasley, Dewitt Long, Ewell Crawford, and Clayton Hicks. These pastors served NZBC on a part-time basis. The 4<sup>th</sup> pastor, Clayton Hicks was also a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Clayton preached the first and third Sundays. He drove up on Saturday and spent the night in someone's home. Sunday's lunch and supper were in another home. Schedules were made up each month so He and his young wife knew in advance where to go. After church Sunday night, they would drive back to Ft. Worth so he could attend classes and his wife could be there to teach school on Monday morning.

Soon after the church called Clayton as pastor, a mission revival was held at the disbanded Parker Grove School House. Following the revival, a mission Sunday school

was held each Sunday afternoon. A short time later, this group decided to organize into a church and petitioned the Fannin County Baptist Association for membership. They were accepted into the association at the October 1949 annual meeting. It was called Parker Grove and Clayton was called to preach the second and fourth Sunday. He did this until he was called to another church. Then, in 1950 NZBC decided to go full-time.

In 1951, the church decided to add additional education space. Material was mostly from an old school building which the church had bought. Ironically, much of the material used to build that school came from the old Mount Zion Baptist church! So, members of the church tore down the school and friends donated most of the labor. Many worked between their regular jobs during the day and then came to the church to work into the night. When finished, there were three classrooms and each was accessible from the outside without bothering the other classes. It was dedicated in 1952.

During these years NZBC reached its zenith. Older members tell of the revival of 1949 when the church had the largest number of people saved. There were so many adults to be baptized that the church used the baptismal in a nearby church to keep the water in the cattle tank (pond) that was normally used from getting too muddy! From 1952 until the mid-1990's the church vacillated between stagnation and decline. Several factors contributed to this trend.

### *Population Decline and Economic Disaster*

The population of Fannin County peaked in 1900 with 51,793 then it slowly declined from that point on. The main source of income has always been agriculture. The number of businesses in the county also peaked in 1900. However, the Great

Depression took a toll on both agriculture and industry and by 1947 businesses of all types hit an all time low.

Between 1940 and 1950, the county lost 10,000 residents. The county was in the center of a region that the government had declared a disaster area due to crop failure. In 1950, a local pastor did a demographic study of Baptist work between 1945 and 1950. He concluded that the churches were becoming stronger in the midst of the social and economic upheaval that they were living in. The associational statistics bear this out, except in the case of NZBC.

Obviously this was due in part to the fact that World War II had drawn to a close and people were returning home. Population growth was short lived. By 1960 it continued its downward shift and bottomed out in 1970 at 22,700. According to records from that time, the county experienced another severe drought and crop failure which further decimated the agrarian economy. So, the United States Government declared North Texas and Southern Oklahoma a disaster area.

After 1970, the population started growing again. As of 2005, population is the highest it has been since 1950. Nevertheless there is still little industry and most of Fannin County is classified as lower-middle class. Most people commute to Paris, Sherman and the Metroplex to work. The economic downturn is, once again having significant adverse effects on the county.

#### *Pastoral Tenure/Low Expectations*

Pastors have never stayed long at New Zion. The church has always prided itself on the fact that it has been a training ground for pastors. This has occurred more out of

necessity than design. Being a small, rural, lower middle class church meant that finances were sparse. So, the church has historically only been able to pay part-time, student, or retirement age ministers. The close proximity to several theological schools in the Metroplex has helped to keep the pulpit filled.

This history of NZBC suggests the truthfulness of an observation that Warren makes.” Healthy churches are led by a pastor who has been there a long time. A long pastorate does not guarantee a church will grow, but changing pastors every few years guarantees a church won’t grow.”<sup>6</sup> Dan Sutherland is even more pointed. “If you are on your way to another ministry do not dare make changes. If you are not willing to stay, if you are not willing to go slow then don’t make changes.”<sup>7</sup>

In general, the church has rather low expectations for the pastor. He was expected to fill the pulpit, marry, bury, and love the people. The pastor has typically had little authority and provided little leadership. But there were good reasons for this. Gary McIntosh put it this way “In every church people place their trust in what is constant. Members of the church realize that pastors come and go, but key families/individuals will always be there.”<sup>8</sup> This is why key families/individuals provide so much leadership while the pastor does not.

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<sup>6</sup> Warren, 30-31.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Sutherland, *Transitioning*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 41.

<sup>8</sup> McIntosh, *One Size*, 66.

*Internal Conflict/Apathy*

As is true in most small churches, there is one key family that has had significant impact on NZBC. One long time member wrote before she died, “The three Ray families who were charter members have played a great part in the history of NZBC, by their faithfulness, stubbornness and sacrifice.”<sup>9</sup> Members of this family have been at the core of every major decision, conflict, or change throughout the history of the church. Issues would rise at various times in various ways that would have significant impact on the life of this church. Several incidences appear to be symbolical in importance if not directly so.

First of all, church history states that there was conflict over the name of the church. Some wanted it to be named Mount Zion and other wanted it to be called New Fulp. When consensus could not be reached, a member of this key family offered a compromise that combined the two names into New Zion.<sup>10</sup>

Another illustration that came out of interviews with several previous pastors was that it was not uncommon to have a member of this family “dress down” a pastor after a sermon, and on occasion in the middle of one over some theological point or personal preference.

Yet, many pastors also spoke fondly of the generosity and kindness that this family could bestow. What seems to be clear is that this family held enormous impact

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<sup>9</sup> This observation came from a written recollection of the early days of the church by long-time member, Neita Ramey.

<sup>10</sup> New Zion Baptist Church, *A History of New Zion Baptist Church* (Bonham, Texas: 2006), 1.

over the influence and success of a pastor. If he was liked and respected things went well. If not, he did not last very long.<sup>11</sup>

Brad Waggoner suggests that “unbiblical relational patterns” in a church are key components of stagnation and decline. Sometimes these patterns manifest themselves in church members with deep generational roots in a congregation. He writes, “Deep generational ties offer some benefits but they also can create some serious flaws in the congregation. Sometimes long standing members see the church as an extension of the family history so they feel a sense of ownership and entitlement.”<sup>12</sup>

These people and patterns are accepted as normal in the congregation and the congregation has become tolerant, while outsiders see the unhealthy relational patterns as a reflection of the church.

By taking the time to read the minutes from business meetings over the years, this researcher uncovered a repetitive theme. Every 6-10 months or so there would be a discussion in a regular scheduled business meeting that always centered around “a discussion on how to get more people in prayer meeting.”<sup>13</sup> It appears that NZBC has always struggled to reach out and connect with the surrounding community.

By the mid 80’s all of these elements had contributed to NZBC becoming stagnant. By this time, most of the key family had moved away or died. In 1988 the stagnation turned into decline after the pastor had been asked to leave. At that point, there

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<sup>11</sup> From a conversation with Claude Hicks, interview by author.

<sup>12</sup> Waggoner, 237.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes from Business Meetings (New Zion Baptist Church, various entries from 1951-1989, handwritten).

seemed to be little chance that the church would ever grow again and seemed to settle into an apathetic acceptance. However, there were a few hardy members who were instrumental in keeping the church going. Soon after that pastor resigned, a previous pastor that was dearly loved came back to help the church heal. Though there was no significant growth during that time, a subtle shift in attitudes and perspective began to occur. By that time, the church had dwindled to about six core families.

In 1994 this writer came to New Zion Baptist Church. It was his last semester in seminary and he and his young bride needed a place to serve. On the Sunday that he preached in view of a call, there were twenty-seven people present. Eight of them voted against him because he did not use the King James Bible. After consulting a wise local pastor, he was told even if the people in that church did not vote for you, if you will become their pastor, they will love and accept you. After much prayer and soul searching, this researcher decided to accept the position.

When he came as pastor the church was averaging 25 in Sunday school and 35 in worship. The church had an annual budget of \$51, 000. Four years later he left NZBC to take an associate pastor position in a large suburban church just outside of Richmond, Virginia. When he did the church was averaging 56 in Sunday school and 75 in worship with a budget of \$79,000. During this time the vision for a new facility began to stir in the heart of the pastor, the key family, and the rest of the church body. The church contemplated relocation and the leadership began looking at land adjacent to a new highway coming through the county. However the purchase never occurred.

About a year later, this researcher left. Though externally, he left on good terms the truth was simple, he was burned out. If change had not occurred, most likely his marriage would have failed and he would have been out of ministry within five years.

A new pastor was called but the church declined in attendance for two years, until 2002 when the Sunday school attendance spiked for one year. This seemed to coincide with a renewed emphasis on Sunday school and evangelism through a witnessing tool that Southern Baptists called FAITH. There is also a correlation between the attendance spike and the excitement of a new building.

During this particular year the church recorded the highest average Sunday school attendance in its history. It was at this time that the church also voted to enter into a building program to build a much needed facility. Overcrowding was not the issue as much as an out-of-date facility was.

Once again, the key family served as a catalyst in this endeavor but it was the core families that really stepped up to the challenge. There were many members and friends of the church that supported the project through monetary gifts, expertise, prayer, and a general sense that this was part of God's will for NZBC. Yet, from 2003-2005 growth would stagnate again in every area except finances. This was due to large monetary gifts towards the building project.

The pastor from 2003 to 2006 was a wise and gentle man named Eddie Frazier. He began serving NZBC on an interim basis because he was retired and planned to stay that way but was so dearly loved that he accepted the position of pastor. The plan was to bring on an associate pastor/youth minister who could be mentored and then in time, become the pastor of the church. A candidate was found, but things did not work out as

planned. The young man stayed for several years at the church serving as an associate pastor and minister to youth, later he did become pastor but in another church. Brother Eddie, as we was affectionally known, told the church that he could not take the church to the next level because of family responsibilities and age so they had better start looking for a new pastor.

In 2006, this researcher was contacted on a completely separate matter, but the question was raised “Was there a possibility that he might consider becoming pastor of NZBC again?” He originally declined but eventually realized that this was exactly what God wanted him to do.

It seems that God had moved him from NZBC to strengthen, heal, and clarify his purpose and passion as a husband, father, and minister. He returned with experience and information gleaned from eight years on staff in a large growing church. He also came with a renewed sense of calling. He knew that God was calling him back to a community that he loved and understood to put down roots and invest in NZBC for the rest of his ministry.

He knew God was calling him back to a church in transition, one that was struggling to adapt to a changing area and culture. He was open and upfront with the church in what needed to be done even before he was voted in. The church agreed that change needed to occur and he was called with a majority vote of 98%.

A question has been raised more than once to this writer. It has been asked why he would leave a large growing suburban church to take a small stagnated country church. The question troubles this writer because it reveals a subtle bias based towards a worldly definition of success.

Sadly, it appears that much of the literature and research on the revitalization of churches focuses on how to grow a stagnant small church into a growing large church. Is pastoring a small church less of a challenge or calling? Is it always God's will for a pastor to be upwardly mobile? Can a church be healthy and growing without becoming a megachurch?

This researcher believes that God has plans for NZBC. It is doubtful that Fannin County will be overtaken by the Metroplex any time in the near future. However, it will be affected by urbanization and postmodern shift.

God may not want NZBC to be a megachurch but God wants NZBC to be healthy and missiological. This is this pastor's understanding of the calling God has given him for the rest of his pastoral ministry and it is the aim of this project.

CHAPTER 4  
THE JOURNEY TOWARDS REVITALIZATION

*A Time of Preparation*

When the writer came on the field in August of 2006, He knew he had a difficult job in front of him. He committed to pray and fast to seek God’s direction for the church. He also asked the church to do the same. From the start, he had been honest about the changes that he has felt needed to occur. In fact he gave to the church a written ministry philosophy that outlined his perspective and plan on most every aspect of ministry.

However, time and perspective had tempered this pastor’s understanding of the changes that needed to be addressed. Bud Smith, a former professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has said, “A pastor should wait 6 months before he makes any major change.” This may not be true in every church but one thing is for sure, in a small rural church small strategic incremental changes are often best in the first few years of a pastor’s tenure. This pastor learned that lesson the hard way!

Over the past three years there have been some good things that have occurred but there have been mistakes as well. Breaking the “Missional code”<sup>1</sup> of a church is not easy. Stetzer and Putnam write that leaders must embrace a process: They must have a calling from God. They must exegete the community. They must examine ways God is working

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<sup>1</sup> Stetzer and Putnam, 21-28.

in similar communities. They must help uncover God unique vision for a particular church. They must be willing to adjust vision in the process of learning the context.

Transitions are difficult in any setting where there are ingrained behaviors and attitudes. Small churches are really good examples of this reality. Historically, strategic planning has been touted as a really good idea. Since WW2, many churches have accomplished this in a process called long range planning.

However, one of the least recognized and applied concepts from Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church* is the idea that long range planning is not as effective in modern church growth as it once was. He writes:

I did not have any long range strategy before I started the church. I simply knew that God wanted me to plant a new church built on five New Testament principles, and I had a bag of ideas that I wanted to try out. Each innovation we've developed was just a response to the circumstances in which we found ourselves . . . Most people think vision as the ability to see the future. But in today's rapidly changing world, vision is the ability to accurately assess current changes and take advantage of them. Vision is being alert to opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

Granted he was referring to starting a church rather than transforming an existing one, but the principle is still sound. Church's have historically used long range planning to create a roadmap into the future. As rapid change becomes the norm in the modern culture this is no longer a practical option. McManus infers that in a fast paced world filled with change, planning is secondary to subservient purpose-filled preparation when he writes, "The key to dealing with this rapidly changing world is not to catch up but to give up on keeping up."<sup>3</sup> A few pages later he adds, "The way not to be overwhelmed by the radical changes and speed in our world is to know where you are going, why you are

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<sup>2</sup> Warren, 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> McManus, 66.

going there, and to do it with urgency.”<sup>4</sup> In a world filled with fast paced change, churches that desire to impact the community and culture will find that they are playing catch up, if it invests too much time and energy in strategic planning rather than strategic preparation and application. Or as McManus declares, “It is only when we move from the strategic to the tactical that the people of God can be most powerfully unleashed.”<sup>5</sup>

For example, this pastor started this project in January 2007. Almost three years later, the challenges, needs, and strategy look completely different than they once did. Though it is true that churches must learn to respond to change around them by making needed (and Biblically sound) changes in mission and methodology the “future belongs to those who prepare for it, not those who plan for.”<sup>6</sup>

This can only occur through strategic preparation. Without such preparation churches will spend more time and resources reacting to effects that the changes around them impose upon them. As this researcher has often said to the church he serves, “we will either manage change or change will manage us.”

By the fall of 2006, this researcher was working to implement a strategic plan for NZBC. For example, during a two week time period, shortly after the arrival of this pastor on the field, he gave a questionnaire to the congregation over a two week period. The first notable thing is that only twenty-five people filled it out. Both Sunday services had between 70-80 people in attendance. There were four questions that were asked.

They were:

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<sup>4</sup> McManus, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>6</sup> McNeal, 119.

1. What do you think NZBC greatest strength is?
2. What do you think NZBC greatest weakness is?
3. What do you think NZBC priorities are?
4. What do you think NZBC priorities should be?

The majority of respondents saw NZBC greatest strength was how the people love and care for one another (64%). About one-fourth (24%) of the respondents saw the building as the greatest strength. Another 40% believed NZBC greatest weakness was music. While 40% saw that the greatest weakness was a lack of commitment and outreach, almost half (48%) of the respondents saw NZBC priorities as the building and ground. A few of the members (20%) said children and youth, while 20% said people/traditions that already exist within the church. When asked what the priorities of NZBC should be, 44% said outreach/community impact, and 32 % said it was important to become more like Christ.

From the questionnaire to the church it is clear that the church suffered from what Barna and Viola refer to as an “edifice complex.”<sup>7</sup> NZBC had a brand new facility that had been mostly completed in 2004. It remained 95% complete for almost two years. The church had been stagnating in attendance since it had moved into the new building and this was of some concern to the leadership.

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<sup>7</sup> “Contemporary Christians have a love affair with brick and mortar. This edifice complex is so ingrained in our thinking that if a group of believers began to gather together, their first thoughts are towards securing a building. How can a group of Christians rightfully claim to be a church without a building (So the thinking goes.)” as cited in Barna and Viola, 10.

It also appears that the church was struggling with several of McIntosh's obstacles to small church growth. These are: a small church mentality, a downward momentum, and decision making based on history (we have never done it that way before).<sup>8</sup>

As suggested earlier some say that a pastor should not make any major changes in the first six months of his tenure. In most cases this is wise advice. But, this pastor felt that some things need to be done immediately. Most likely he was given more freedom to make changes, because he had been a pastor at NZBC before and there was a certain level of trust already present.

Therefore, three significant changes were made: Two in worship, and one in staffing. He began working with musicians to change worship style. He led the church purchase three projectors that had already been voted on before he arrived. A part-time secretary was hired. This researcher recognized the divisive nature of introducing innovative methodologies before a church is ready to accept them but felt that the change in worship style and use of more technology was a risk worth taking. He did have the backing of leadership and key families in this matter but it still was not an easy transition.

The change was rocky. Most people wanted the change but were afraid of offending the older more established members. There was also conflict that resulted in a pianist being replaced. The pianist was a personal friend of the writer. The conflict was painful on several levels but it surrounded an issue that needed addressing. Though the pianist and his family left the church, the pastor and the pianist kept their relationship intact!

The last major immediate change was the hiring of a part-time secretary. This researcher is not a detailed person. Within the first six months the church had an effective

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<sup>8</sup> McIntosh, 144-145.

newsletter and bulletin. Emails, letters, and phone calls were being answered promptly, though this still is struggle for the pastor. The church began moving towards computerizing financial and membership information. The church began to develop brochures, work on advertising, and began improving the church website. None of this would have been possible without administrative help to deal with some of the day to day organizational and relational issues that inevitably occur.

Within the first five months the pastor focused his preaching on spiritual formation through a series on Sunday morning about the seven deadly sins, followed with a return to the basics of being a Jesus follower through series on the Sermon on the Mount.

During this time there were demographic research done on Fannin County and historical studies done on NZBC. The findings from this research were presented in four weeks of Sunday night services.

January 2007 returned to the themes of spiritual formation and renewal. The first series was called *First Things First in 07* which focused on life priorities. Then there was a series on renewal and revival from the book of Nehemiah called *When Renewal Really Happens*. Through these series, the groundwork was being laid for the vision that the pastor believed God had for the church.

During this time he also communicating with church leaders and key families the need for re-structure and re-focus. By the time summer had arrived it appeared that two things reversed the “downward momentum”<sup>9</sup> that McIntosh referred to.

First of all, a significant financial gift was given that would allow the church to finish the facilities and fund some important ministries, Also, a children’s ministry was

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 144.

revitalized when AWANA and a Children's Performances Art Choir was started. Then, the church had an extremely effective Vacation Bible School. The children's ministry had an immediate effect on the number of new people that visited and joined. The church finished the 06-07 year with the most baptisms (14) it had seen in over 35 years.

By the end of the summer 2007, the pastor felt that the church was ready for the next phase of strategic preparation.

### *A Time of Celebration*

As summer came to a close, the new facility was finally complete. At this time, there was recognition of the need to commemorate this milestone in the history of NZBC. The rationale for this was simple. There is overwhelming evidence that has shown that churches have life cycles. The older a church gets the harder change becomes. McIntosh offers several ideas to help a church "ride the waves of generational change"<sup>10</sup> that were helpful to this researcher at this time. In general, researchers advocate that church health can flourish in the midst of change, if there is an honest effort to celebrate and honor the past as the church moves forward. It is a necessary step in the right direction that puts the past in proper perspective. McManus states it this way:

While God instructs his people over and over again to remember all of his great deeds, He does not call us to live in the past. Memories are intended to be fuel for future faith. They are not intended to become an alternative reality in which we choose to hide from the present challenges. God promises He is doing something worth living for right now. And it is happening in front of our very eyes. The tragedy is that we may not even see it . . . This is the danger of nostalgia: In the

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<sup>10</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Three Generations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1995), 199-202.

comfort of a safe time-place, we become blind not only to the real world we are called to engage but also to the movement of God's Spirit in our day.<sup>11</sup>

Many experts agree that churches experience life cycles. Though there is general agreement that life cycles occur, the experts are unclear on whether not death and decline can be circumvented and delayed indefinitely. Is death always inevitable? What about resurrection and rebirth? Is it a realistic expectation to evaluate a church's organizational health in terms of birth, life and death, without factoring in the resurrection power of God? Malphurs says yes if there is an understanding of the "Sigmoid curve"<sup>12</sup> and the need to start something new. McIntosh writes there is always a potential for rebirth "if the congregation is willing to allow the Spirit to work anew in the life of the church."<sup>13</sup>

Dale says that a church must learn at various times to dream new kingdom dreams that always include the reality of "redemption of people and institutions."<sup>14</sup> They all acknowledge that starting something new requires letting go of the past. However, such churches are rare.

According to *The Leadership Journal*, 340,000 churches are in desperate need of revitalization.<sup>15</sup> But, revitalization is not an easy task. If it were "70-80 percent of North

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<sup>11</sup> McManus, 92.

<sup>12</sup> Malphurs Aubrey, *Strategic Planning*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Next Level*, 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> Dale, 38-39.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ctlibrary.com/le/2005/fall/8.24.html>

American churches would not be stagnant and declining, and 3,500-4000 U.S Churches would not close each year.”<sup>16</sup>

When a church declines and becomes stagnant, it is sick and dying. Whether or not sustained growth after an extended period will occur is determined by only the power of God and the response of the people. Also, whether or not this is called revitalization, rebirth, or resurrection is up to the experts to determine. Nevertheless, if it does not occur, the church should die. When the church no longer maintains an organic identity as a vibrant expression of bodily presence of Christ in a community, it is for all practical purposes dead anyway. Towns and Stetzer are emphatic on this point. They write: “Some churches need to die. The advancement of post-modernity will not contribute to the collapse of the true church, but it will contribute to the collapse of many apostate churches or dead churches.”<sup>17</sup>

When people face the departure of a loved one or their own impending death, pastoral care providers understand the need to help the person(s) through a grieving process. Inherent in the grieving process is the need to help the dying evaluate and celebrate the past. This helps them move from past to the present in an effort to prepare them for what the future holds. Some experts also suggest that people need to be allowed to experience grief in dealing with any major loss or life change. Therefore, it is helpful for declining churches to grieve the loss of passed successes, methods, and memories in an effort to move forward into a hopeful future.

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<sup>16</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2007), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Towns and Stetzer, 162.

The reasoning behind such a belief is inherently theological. During a doctoral intensive in 2005, this writer was introduced to a thematic understanding of Biblical truth. It helped define a perspective on life. The themes of Birth, Life, Death, and Resurrection happen in creation, in life, and maybe even in organizations such as the church. McManus wrote, “Only dead men can follow the cross of God.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, true life in Christ can only be experience when people (which make up congregations) die to self. Jesus, the final authority on these matters taught, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily, and follow me. Whoever wants to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will save it.” (Luke 19: 23-24)

This pastor decided to preach a sermon on the memorial stones in Joshua 3 on a special day of dedication for the new church facility. Invitations were sent to all known living pastors and former members. It was a high attendance day complete with an old fashion potluck dinner. Most of the spring and summer of 2007 was spent compiling historical information about NZBC .A commemorative booklet was printed and given to all friends, former pastors, and past and present members of NZBC.

During the July 2007 business meeting, the pastor and deacons brought a joint recommendation with a proposal to enter into a formal process of strategic preparation and reorganization. It was voted on an approved by the church body and a date was set to begin.

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<sup>18</sup> McManus, 33.

*A Time of Introspection*

On Saturday September 15, 2007 the whole church was invited to initial planning session. Twenty Three people met together in the church sanctuary. The group consisted of deacons, Sunday school leaders, and several key families. The time was spent working through a process that included what Malphurs calls “brainstorming, storyboarding, 1-10 scale, and consensus.”<sup>19</sup>

But before the group got to work the pastor took time to reflect on some demographic and historical information. Since the humble beginning of NZBC, the following statistic can be gleaned:

From it’s inception in 1944, NZBC has baptized 252 people. Church membership and Sunday school attendance have experienced a general pattern of decline since 1950. There have been spikes in membership, attendance, and baptism but until 1994, there has never been a pattern of growth that lasted longer than four years.

Between the years of 1944-49, the church recorded its highest numbers in baptisms, Sunday school attendance, and membership but no sustained growth. The statistical ceiling after 1949 until 2006 was 120 in membership, 80 in Sunday school attendance, and 15 baptisms in a single year.

Methodology has changed little in three decades. The church has no governing documents, few written policies and procedures in place, and has done little if any strategic planning in its history. Many people in the county do not even know where the church is located. Those who do know where we are know little about the congregation.

Demographically, it is safe to say that the county is in transition. According to census data, this area has grown in population 27% from 1990-2000. From 2000-2006 it has increased another 9% and if present trends continue the population will increase another 7% from 2006-2011.<sup>20</sup>

The latest research states that one out of every four people in Fannin County have no church affiliation. Now this does not mean that they are agnostic or atheistic. It just

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<sup>19</sup> Malphurs, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Us Census Database, (US Census Bureau), <http://factfinder.census.gov/> (Demographic information; accessed October 18, 2007).

means that they are either unchurched or part of a group that is not included in the study. Within a five mile radius of the church there are over 13,000 people living within a ten mile radius there are over 20,000 people.

If the ratio holds true, then there are at 300-500 people that may not have a church home (not to mention those who are on church roles but may not have a relationship with a living Lord). NZBC must make a concerted effort to reach those people. This church must disciple and mobilize those that are reached fulfill the Great Commission and Great Commandment.<sup>21</sup>

Out of that meeting several things occurred. First of all many of the older members present expressed the fact that they had never taken time to work through such a process and they found it helpful and encouraging. Secondly, some of the newer members expressed appreciation for being able to have input in the direction of the church. During this time a mission statement was created. Core values were identified. Priorities were determined. Six functions of a healthy church were affirmed. Finally, the unique God-given vision for NZBC was articulated.

Organizationally, the need for governing documents was recognized. In the next business meeting, a CBL team was commissioned with the task of creating the documents for church perusal and approval. The group sought to create ministry teams that were organized around those priorities discussed. The church then voted to replace committees with six priority ministry teams.

A few other recommendations to the church came out of that meeting. The group thought that it might be beneficial to the church to shift the Sunday school year from October –September to June-May. The rationale behind this was that the church's busiest time was in the fall. If Sunday school promoted at the end of the school year,

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<sup>21</sup> These statistics came from a combined study that incorporated census data, demographic information, and Fannin Baptist Associational records.

summer was a good time to work out any issues and problems before the church hit full stride when school started back.

Another recommendation was the suggestion that it might be good to investigate the idea of small group/in home bible studies as a viable outreach tool. The need for part-time staff member to lead music and/or youth was discussed. A new member's orientation was also discussed. For the most part the church appeared to be energized and excited about the possibilities that lay ahead. They left that meeting, with a sense that a foundation has been laid.

One year later the church met again to evaluate church progress. By this time a new staff member had been hired to lead music and youth. The worship service had a more contemporary feel. Sunday school and worship attendance were growing. People were joining and being baptized. A pumpkin patch had been created for a fall outreach, small groups were formed for a six week time period in the summer, and the children's ministry had connected the church with several prospective families. The church was getting ready to have a Friend Day. On that day, NZBC would have the highest recorded Sunday school (126) and Worship attendance (203) in its history and a Team Impact Crusade that would average 230 people a night with 53 salvations.

Several of the ministry teams were doing good work. Some were struggling. A few of the teams never really got going. The Constitution and By-laws team was making progress. All in all, the church seemed to pulse with activity.

Statistically, 2007-2008 would end up being another good year. By all traditional measures of growth, NZBC would hit another record. But statistics never tell the whole story and all was not well. For a church that have never averaged over 100 in Sunday School and

120 in worship, bumping up against those barriers produces discomfort. An undercurrent of disharmony began to occur.

The constitution and by-laws committee became deadlocked over personal, doctrinal, and organizational disagreements. The Christian school that had been using the church facilities was a constant focus of conflict. At the end of 2008, the global economic crisis was looming. All of the sudden two things began to occur. Attendance dropped off and giving declined dramatically.

At first the decline was attributed to spiritual warfare and the discomfort of the people. Issues may have been contributing factors, but they were not the driving ones.

Change is not easy for anyone. In retrospect, the pastor realized that some pastoral/administrative measures could have been taken to deal with these impending issues up front.

However, conflict management is never easy. So, it is easy to overlook the warning signs when sparks begin to fly.

In reality, a firestorm was brewing. Though in “the early stages”<sup>22</sup> it needed to be addressed. As Susek points out “sparks of conflict are generated all the time and rarely go out. They can smolder for years in a deep emotional memory bank before becoming a fire storm. To assume they will just vanish is a grave mistake.”<sup>23</sup>

By the spring of 2009, the whole spirit of the church had changed. For that matter, the energy and excitement felt by the pastor in relation to the task that God had brought him to NZBC to do had drained away. Using a Biblical analogy, “the brook at Cherith dried up.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The life cycle of a firestorm of church conflict follows six observable phases. The earlier the conflict is addressed the better it is for all involved as cited in Ron Susek, *Firestorm* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerBooks, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

*A Time of Redirection*

NZBC was stagnant and has been so for most of its existence. There were several points through the years where there was a surge in growth. But, it never lasted. The assumption has been that this was due to short pastoral tenures and inadequate organization and vision. It was thought that a change in methodology and strong pastoral leadership would be the keys to the revitalization of NZBC.

Though these factors are components of revitalization, they are not the only ones. Ministers will often give lip service to the fact that a church is an organization and organism. But, the prevailing belief (whether or not it is acknowledged) is that with the right process, personnel, and programming, an organization can be built to meet needs and expectations.

In frustration (and a little fear) this pastor began to question almost everything. He thought it may be the end of church ministry for him. However, he came to embrace the possibility that it might be a new beginning.

Around this time, there was a rediscovery of works from Anthony Pappas, Glenn Wagner, and Lynn Anderson. God used the writings of these three authors to re-frame the writer's perspective. For example, Pappas writes:

In college, I was well trained. I learned to think logically and analytically. I learned the knottiest problem could be chopped into little pieces (which makes it easier to sweep them under the rug). I learned that all problems have solutions. It took much longer to realize that all solutions have problems. I learned that nothing has to be the way it is and everything can be improved (in other words nothing is sacred). I learned about the history of progress and the progress of history. I thought I was

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<sup>24</sup> Elijah had experienced the guidance of God. At Cherith he found a haven of provision care. Then the birds disappeared and the brook dried up and God told him it was time to do something different in I Kings 17:5-7.

just taking courses, but I was learning a way to think about life . . . At Seminary, I learned everything that I learned in college, though now in reference to church . . . I was instructed on how to be a professional church leader, how to administer the church, how to organize the coming of God's kingdom, how to assimilate new members... I learned the theology of a funeral and experienced the funeral of theology...then I entered small church life.<sup>25</sup>

This writer became the pastor of NZBC in September 1994. Fresh out of seminary, he thought he was well equipped to be a pastor. Frankly, he was not. Four years later, he was burned out. His personal and spiritual life was in shambles. His marriage was in trouble.

God in His grace moved the pastor to another church in Virginia where he was able to serve as an associate pastor, while he healed and matured. At that time he was discovering some important truths about himself, his pastoral identity, and his unique giftedness. His marriage got stronger and his family grew. Being in a larger church has benefits and drawbacks but the church he served was an unusual one. Though far from perfect, it felt small and safe (that church averaged around 1000 in worship!) There was no expectation to be everything to everyone. A pastor could be himself and he was accepted. It felt like, what Larry Crabb calls true spiritual community.

Moving to Virginia began a journey of discovery. Moving back to Texas continued it. During the spring of 2009, the pastor wrote in a journal a summary of the lessons learned during that time. Here is an excerpt from that entry:

While in seminary, many of us in ministry were exposed to good theology (or at least how to think theologically). There was very little taught concerning interpersonal/relational issues.

Any leadership training that we got was designed to apply to the average church. The average church had a 1950s structure/mentality even in the late 80s-90s.

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<sup>25</sup> Pappas, x.

By the 80s and 90s, the leadership models that were "effective" were gleaned more from business models rather than the Bible. Good leadership is good leadership wherever one finds it but, in my honest opinion, it appears that good leadership was determined more by "nickels and noses" rather than disciple-making and concentric circles of relational impact.

So with bad interpersonal skills and faulty leadership training (either 1950s style...or a pragmatic business mentality) many of us entered into circa 1950 churches...that were stagnant and dying... because that is what one did...you started small and grew the church or moved to a larger church when God "called you" to do so.

Like spiritual pornography we fantasized over every glossy airbrushed beautiful testimony of a glowing ministerial position and growing ministry given to us by a peer, book, or church growth/ leadership conference and assumed that that was what the church was created to be.

Then one day we found ourselves face to face with reality. Ministry did not measure up to what everyone said it could be. In all honesty we were drying up inside. We blamed the churches we served. We blamed the people in our churches. We blamed the devil. We blamed ourselves. In quiet moments we secretly even blamed God.

Many of us have been brought to this point by personal crisis: addictions, moral failures, financial disaster, marriage difficulties, depression, catastrophic illness or job loss. We found ourselves at a place where we had to question everything and the answers we found were no longer pithy, glossy, simple, or even easy to express. Yet they nourished our souls. We still believe that the Bible is true. We still believe in Jesus and His church. We still have a heart for people inside and outside the church. We still have questions. We still struggle. We are still learning. We still have good days and bad days but every day is hopeful. We still want to be successful but the criterion has changed.<sup>26</sup>

For reasons know only to God, this pastor and his family felt called back to NZBC.

By this time eight years had passed. It did not take long, before two realizations occurred.

First of all, there really is a difference between small congregations and large ones.

Secondly, this pastor realized he had changed a great deal but NZBC had changed very little.

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<sup>26</sup> From thoughts compiled into journal entry (April, 2009) by the author.

In an effort to re-create the spiritual community he had experienced in Virginia, he attempted to reproduce, organizationally what he had seen. *This was his first major mistake.* Every church is unique. Even if this were not so, organization does not produce spiritual community. Instead, it should flow from it.

NZBC experienced a flurry of activity. However, this does not equate to vitality. This researcher has served as a hospice chaplain. He has seen death close up. He has watched families authorize extraordinary measures to keep a loved one alive because they were not ready to let go. Life support may keep the body functioning but it is not living.

Individuals will often rally long enough for some final goodbyes before they finally succumb to death but it is always a temporary rally. McNeal adds “All this activity anesthetizes the pain of loss. It offers a way to stay busy and preoccupied while “not facing the hard truth; none of this seems to be making much difference.”<sup>27</sup>

In the church, people were attending. They were involved at various levels. But hearts and lives were not being changed. In the words of McManus, “You can change things but if hearts do not change, atrophy will kill you in the end.”<sup>28</sup> The pastor had neglected this vital spiritual truth. *This was major mistake number two.*

There was a sense by many in the congregation that something was fundamentally wrong. The changes that had been discussed and agreed upon by the whole church body were occurring but it was as if the church was feeling disorientation and debilitation.

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<sup>27</sup> McNeal, 7.

<sup>28</sup> McManus, 35.

“Nostalgia is an expression of corporate depression.”<sup>29</sup> When changes happen in a congregation that fundamentally affects the structure or challenges the status quo, it produces grief. This grief is generally communicated by focusing on a glorified past. When a congregation spends too much time longing for the good old days, there is no energy to move forward into a hopeful future.

In time, it became apparent that the church was losing people. There were several deaths. Some older established members, stopped attending due to declining health. A few people left because they honestly did not like the direction the church was heading. Those who were honest enough to explain their reasoning did so with little animosity and in a spirit of good will.

However the largest group of people who chose to leave usually was those who were unhappy about the church they were attending so they joined NZBC because they thought a new pastor signified a new direction. Within a few years, the majority of those folks had moved on. Church hopping is not a new phenomenon. But, it was interesting to note that those who left as things got tough had done it before. The new members that stayed were new believers and people with little or no church background who had become part of the church family.

Secondly, there was growing struggle over personal preferences in relation to music and programs. This manifested itself as an undercurrent of disagreement rather than full-blown dissent. What was absolutely true was a strong sense of frustration and anxiety over a lack of perceived Spirit-led direction. It seemed that the church had lost

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<sup>29</sup> Dale, 111.

focus and direction. Several individuals in leadership commented on the tangible nature of this feeling.

In Clinical Pastoral Education, this pastor learned about a phenomenon called parallel process. In an article in *Psychology Today*, the author, Michael Formica describes it this way:

James came to me several months ago, heartbroken over the loss of the love of his life. He was struggling not only with his sense of loss, but feelings of betrayal, his own responsibility in the matter, self-doubt and an overarching sadness, just to start. We began to work on developing some perspective - who was responsible for what? What was this on-going undercurrent of anxiety? What was the place and motive of this grief? Where was he now and where did he now want to go?

Not long into our therapeutic relationship, I suffered my own loss and, at our next meeting, I found myself staring straight into a mirror of my own grief. Well, now, what do you do with that?

You can do two things: you can allow your own issues to get the best of you and get drawn into your client's spin - very messy -- or you can use your own process to benefit the client, and your client's process to propel your own. That's parallel process, and it's a powerful tool that benefits everyone when employed judiciously. It is a teacher, a guide and a mentor.<sup>30</sup>

The pastor came to realize several things due to a parallel process with NZBC. First of all, both were trying to be something they were not. Secondly, both were experiencing anxiety over the lack of Spirit-led direction. Also, both were focused more on the external rather than the internal. Last of all, there was recognition of the fact that the church was not willing to do the very things he was not willing to do!

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<sup>30</sup> Michael J. Formica, "The Me in You: Parallel Process," *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/enlightened-living/200901/the-me-in-you-parallel-process-in-psychotherapy>

Leaders must mentor, model, and initiate. They must do so out of an awareness of God-given strengths, weaknesses, and abilities. They must model authenticity, and dependency upon the Holy Spirit. They must be willing to be out front “not as champions of change but catalysts for change.”<sup>31</sup> McManus puts it another way when he writes:

Remember that velocity is speed with direction. This translates into intentionality. When the church is moving on mission with God, velocity and mass together can create momentum. Velocity is critical to apostolic leadership. The leader must have clear direction and must move with intentionality in that direction. I know it has been said before but the leader really does need to be out front...Leadership is not simply about setting the course or steering the course; it is about running the course... Something mystical happens when you get over your motion sickness and began to move with God...

However he writes earlier...

We cannot be so anxious to accomplish the vision that God has placed in our hearts that we only see the straight line. The journey is full of unexpected twists and turns- the very context for God’s miraculous surprises.<sup>32</sup>

A pastor must be the mentor and initiator that God had called him to be. Even with good intentions and proper focus, it is easy to lose sight of the calling to be a courageous shepherd. *This was major mistake number three.*

Another contributing factor could have been that historically the church has changed pastors about every three years. It is almost as if the church had been conditioned to expect this to occur and to be honest, this researcher often thought leaving during this time. Could it be that there was uncertainty (or hopefulness) that this might

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<sup>31</sup> Pappas, 125.

<sup>32</sup> McManus, 73.

occur. Did the uncertainty in the hearts of the pastor and people contribute to loss of momentum? It certainly seemed plausible.

Also, the church experienced major financial strain (and fear) due to the global recession that continues to occur. In September 2008, giving had been on the increase. However, the church was still spending more than it was taking in. This was made possible through a large financial gift given in 2007. There was anticipation of growth both financial and numerically. With the help of this financial cushion and a hopeful future, the church adopted a challenging budget in January 2009. By August of 2009, giving had dropped 20% from 2008 amounts. The 2009 budget assumed a 20% increase. Needless to say, by September of 2009 financial spending and outlook changed dramatically.

So, the pastor began to ask questions. What would NZBC look like if it was a healthy church? What does organic faith look like in this context? How does a small local organized body of believers that is tenacious, tenderhearted, and traditional get back on track when they have lost heart and focus? How does a pastor that spent a great deal of time over 30 months pushing organizational change rather than cultivating relational change, evaluate and redirect his efforts as the shepherd God has called him to be?

By the fall 2009, a redirection had occurred. Tired of busyness and weary of misdirected activity, the pastor longed to see the day when the church he loved had a kingdom focus that moved beyond the walls of the building they met in.

Everything up to this point was focused on trying to do church better. In the process of this quest, the calling to help the church be the church was lost. Organization was still necessary. But many of the struggles the church was facing could be traced back

to systemic issues that had been around for decades. An explanation of the natural dynamics of relationships (and leadership) at this level was quite enlightening.

Not all firestorms start with malicious intent, just a lack of maturity in handling differences. If leadership fails here, people's dispositions change from collaborative to adversarial. While leadership ministers it is God who molds. When people's distinctiveness is ignored and an attempt is made to conform everyone to leadership's image, small fire ignite... True pastoral leadership nurtures the best in people, even if the people's various perspectives causes the pastor's path for the church to meander. A pastor must be primarily given to the people's good and not his own inflexible goals.

When leadership dominates, people feel that they are being used and not being equipped to do their own ministry. This usually results in anger or ambivalence... When ministers equip people instead of using them to accomplish an agenda; they generally gain a sense of ownership that makes them highly productive.<sup>33</sup>

In fact the opposite is just as true. In all reality "ineffective equipping and ineffective assimilation are the two most critical growth stoppers in many churches today."<sup>34</sup>

By far the greatest transformation in methodology occurred at this point. NZBC began to be seen from a cultural perspective. McNeal and McManus have pointed out quite effectively that the North American church has its own culture. Each North American congregation is a sub-culture of the American church culture. Small churches are no exception. But, actually conceptualizing congregational beliefs, rituals, behavior, values, in terms of culture was a new idea.

When the pastor came to the church in 2006, a paper was given to the church that outlined a ministry philosophy. There was arrogance in the assumption that the pastor

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<sup>33</sup> Susek, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, 80.

knew what the church needed before he got to the field. Though the principles behind the paper were sound, the particular application of those principles violated two important aspects of ministry especially in the small church culture.

First of all, pastors need to be very careful in their zeal to fix what they perceive is broken in a church, not to commit culture crashing. This is when a pastor or staff member accepts a position in a church with an established culture, then tries to radically change the culture.

This is primarily seen in efforts to make old churches young, traditional churches contemporary . . . The intent to draw sinners, not saints to God is good but should not be at the expense of an existing culture, unless of course, the church is dying and in desperate need of some kind of change to become effective again. . . Missionaries learn the hard way, it is their job to take the gospel into the culture, not change the culture. Your work (as a pastor) is to root out sin, not destroy the culture. . . You must honor the culture in which they learned to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup>

Then and only then can a pastor shepherd a congregation implement needed changes that contribute to health and vitality, and enable the church to become cross cultural missionary sending organization.

Vella suggests that any learning process which actually leads to effective and desired outcomes can only occur “when there is an awareness and respect for the cultural context of a group of learners.”<sup>36</sup> Not only must there be awareness and respect, but the facilitator must amend and adapt the learning process to reflect the cultural paradigm in which the learning process is occurring.

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<sup>35</sup> Susek, 97.

<sup>36</sup> Vella, 32.

In other words, cultural paradigms effect how a group perceives reality and experiences learning. Church growth experts and cross cultural missiologists call this contextualization. Simply put, the gospel must radically influence people in one culture (the church culture) before they will care enough to do whatever it takes (within Biblical boundaries of course) to set aside a comfortable context to reach out to people in another culture (the world).

Becoming a catalyst for “the transformation of a (church) culture is a fragile and volatile undertaking.” McManus offers a helpful five step process.<sup>37</sup>

First of all, there must be re-introduction to the God-given purpose of the church. Followers of Jesus Christ must wrestle with all assumptions of what church should be and take the time to allow the Scripture (and the Spirit) to speak in a fresh way. They must move backwards before they can ever move forward. The call to change *must* to be tied directly to God’s calling and design for the church.

After expounding upon the original purpose of the church, problems (both obvious and camouflaged) must be exposed and dealt with. Clear problems are related to the present condition of the church in relationship to the mission of Christ. Camouflaged problems are the ones that are hidden in the human heart and involve motivation and values. Prophetic leadership understands that the problems are road guides on the journey to spiritual health of church not just obstacles. This is not always easy. Before problem solving can occur, one must deal with the issues related to avoiding those problems. When problems are ignored, the truth is compromised and lack of confidence

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<sup>37</sup> McManus, 186-197.

in God's power to overcome them is communicated. The only problems that can be solved are the ones that are engaged. The only problems that can be engaged are the ones that are brought into the light.

The third step, after rediscovering purpose and dealing with problems is to effectively uncover leadership. Vision can only be effective if it is shared. Radical transition can never occur without the influence of key spiritual leaders necessary for a healthy transition. Indigenous leaders in an established (church) culture must respond to a prophetic call to embrace the purposes of God. Many times pastors are lone voices calling from the wilderness."<sup>38</sup> They may be loved and welcomed by congregations, but their voices are never strong enough to lead a people into the unknown. Therefore, the key to cultural transition "is not to bring something alien into a culture, but to call out from within that culture those things that are most true and right."<sup>39</sup>

When a church culture is transitioning, it begins to rediscover purpose, deal with problems, and rise up indigenous leadership. Eventually, if the process is occurring, the congregation becomes energized by possibilities. If the first three steps have been effectively engaged, the community should now be focused on *how* and not *why*. Many leaders make the mistake of beginning with *what* rather than *why*. This is often because they believe the *why* is obvious. This is not always so. Once the *why* is understood, then, the dominating question becomes *how*? The *how* will always flow from a strategic purpose.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 194.

The final step is to integrate the change process in all that is done. The church must be understood as a catalyst for change. This does not mean that everything changes. In fact, it is good to remind those who are experiencing the process of change of all the things that will not change. It is vital to call people to *change* and not just *changes*. Change is hard. Change cannot occur without experiencing loss (which should be grieved) or the hope of gain (which entails risk). Even God's people have a difficult time with grief and risk. Leaders do not have to be the primary agents of change. But, they must be primary examples of change. When people see that their leaders are willing to risk and sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel and others, something is stirred in them and they are more willing to do the same. Maybe this is what the writer of Hebrews had in mind when he encouraged believers to "spur one another to love and good deeds." (Hebrews 10:24)

However, the process of change cannot be facilitated from a perspective of being outside of a culture. A culture crasher will never be an effective catalyst for change. He must embrace Incarnational ministry. The pastor realized he had not been modeling Incarnational ministry. In fact, it was discovered that there is often conflict between professional ministry and Incarnational ministry.

It is easy to get things mixed up. "It can be difficult to distinguish between loving people for who they are (and where they are) verses using them for how the leaders mission."<sup>40</sup> Is the desire to see people converted and the church growing more about building God's kingdom or a pastor's? It is a sobering question to ponder.

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<sup>40</sup> Scazzero, 176-177.

How do the needs of people get lost in the midst of the overwhelming expectations of church work? Obviously, there is a tension in the unspoken demand to draw and keep a crowd and the desire to have the time to be with people and in an effort to recognize (and help them do the same) the Lord's work, and touch in the midst of real life.

There are over fifty references to mutual ministry in the New Testament. This is when the inspired writers commanded believers in the early church to edify, pray for, minister to, and encourage *one another*. In the modern church this mutual ministry has been relegated to paid professionals. It is no wonder that ministers are overwhelmed with the expectations placed on them. God never designed the church to function in that way.

It was a struggle but there was finally a realization that much of identity and time had become wrapped up in an attempt to be seen as successful in church work. After all, most churches usually define success in three ways; buildings, budgets, and attendance. A good leader is supposed to preach uplifting sermons while managing the church machinery well.

He is to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 50 weeks a year. He must evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the program and personnel needs of the church with proficiency. He must be able to promote vision and direction with clarity and conviction. When these desired outcomes do not occur there are often feelings of confusion, frustration, fear, and finger pointing.

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In seminary, ministers were taught so that others could be instructed. “Thus ‘teach and instruct’ not ‘listen and learn’ were the dominant behavior expected of trained leaders. Entering into people’s world only occurred enough to change them, not necessarily to love them.”<sup>41</sup>

It was Bonhoeffer who offered a warning in this area. Too many times leaders love the “idea”<sup>42</sup> of spiritual community. It is much more difficult to actually love the imperfect people within that community and help them to love another. This is primarily because of the unmanageable, messy world of relationships.

This pastor identified a great deal with Pappas who wrote:

I was confused and frustrated . . . To the degree that these people opposed me and my position, I thought they were lousy Christians, or nuts, or both. Fortunately I discovered by God’s grace and my parishioners patience; they were operating out of a different system than I was—a system with different values, perceptions, and understandings. The world looks different to small church people, and their thought processes differed from my abstract, rational, educated, individualized, goal-setting point of view. Their worldview was not right (moral, Christian, biblical) just because they used it, just as it was not wrong just because it differed from mine. If any worldview is to be “righted,” however, it must be done from the inside. And if we are to minister effectively in the small church, we must first step (and live) into that world. After all, Jesus stepped into ours.<sup>43</sup>

This point of view helped to birth some clarity in connection with several vital truths. Most importantly, God had called the pastor back to Fannin County for a purpose that was bigger than originally thought. In fact, the original vision that had been communicated to the church was too anemic. However, there needed to be an intentional

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<sup>41</sup> Scazzero, 176-177.

<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1954), 29-30.

<sup>43</sup> Pappas, xii.

effort to enter into (and understand) small church culture and small church people. Only then can there ever be any hope of leading those in that culture to be cross cultural missionaries outside of the walls of the church.

Secondly, the church must return back to the original dream it was founded on and reframe it in the context of the Great Commission and Great Commandment. Also, there was a clear realization that the focus had attempting had been organizational change rather than organic change.

Over a period of about three months during the summer of 2009, the pastor put down this project and picked up the Bible. During this soul searching time with God, an effort was made to read, not for sermons, or for a thesis but for the vibrancy of the pastor's heart and the church that he served.

By delving deeply into scripture and praying a great deal, a new perspective on calling and gifts was uncovered. Insights from various resources began to shed light on everything that the church was facing and the task that was ahead. Now it was time to get back to work. By this time, Church attendance had stabilized. Financial support leveled out. The emotional energy that permeated the church what not so much a sense of anxiety but, rather one of discontent not necessarily with leadership or worship style, but with the status quo however, it was defined.

There seemed to be a tangible hunger for something substantial. The things that once satisfied were no longer doing the job. This hunger was a hopeful sign. This is because hospice chaplains know that the dying lose their desire for nourishment. As the body shuts down, the capacity and need for food is no longer present. Where there is hunger, there is bodily function and growth. It was time to dream again.

*A Time of Application*

According to Dale, there are four ways to bring change to a church: change policy, change personnel, change programs, or clarify vision.”<sup>44</sup> The first three changes can produce immediate and sometimes only short term results. But, clarifying purpose, (dream or idea) that is a more effective avenue.

Every church and every individual in that church has a unique (and collective) idea of what a church should be. This idea is called several things: purpose, vision, or dream. Purpose gives church life shape and function. Organizations are explained by the dreams that birth them. Vision creates expectations and those expectations usually come to life. Generally speaking because of this, a congregation’s original purpose, dream, or vision will shape its future to a large extent.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, a pastor must mine the church’s history to seek out nuggets of valuable information that can serve as a foundation for moving forward. Dale calls these “clue stories”<sup>46</sup> that help to explain church life, perception, and function. McManus writes “Every (church) culture has stories that are wrapped up in their religion, their mythology, their folklore. These stories entertain, inform, define and direct.”<sup>47</sup> Don Richardson says that every culture has within its history and heritage, “redemptive

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<sup>44</sup> Dale, 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>47</sup> McManus, 141.

lore.”<sup>48</sup> These stories are the keys to releasing the transforming power of the gospel in those cultures.

Pappas makes a good case in suggesting that small churches function like a tribe. Every tribe has stories that are woven into the very fabric of tribal life and he believes that stories are at the heart of small church life.<sup>49</sup>

They are valuable as coping mechanisms for change and tools for reshaping identity. They inspire faithfulness and galvanize responses to various situations. They empower individuals and release congregational effectiveness.

A good example of how a story affects perception can be seen in an incident that happened one Sunday morning at NZBC. In January 2010, the very first sermon in a series entitled *The Top 10 Things That Make a Congregation a Church* was being preached. That sermon began with these statements: “The New Testament never calls for the church to become something. Instead, it calls the church to live in light of what it is! In other words, remember who you are!”

At that moment there were several people in the congregation whose faces lit up and they whispered excitedly among themselves. After the service was over, many of those people came up to the pastor and said, “Pastor as soon as you said that we all turned and looked at one another and said Aunt Exie! “Aunt Exie was a charter member and part of one of the founding families at NZBC who taught Sunday school for many years until she died. She was a wise woman. Anyone who left her house or Sunday school class

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<sup>48</sup> Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981), 59.

<sup>49</sup> Pappas, 127-129.

would be reminded very quietly, “Remember who you are!” The pastor had stumbled upon a phrase that was packed with meaning and memory and it communicated more than the sermon ever could!

For the small church pastor the reason *why* a church does something is important. However, the *why* reveals the logic behind a rationally structured organization and a small church is not primarily such an organization. Most likely, a small church has forgotten why things are done they way they are done and have just accepted how things are done. However, if there is an explanation offered, it is usually framed within a story.

Pushing for a reason (without a good reason) or dismissing a practice just because it is outdated and not understood, leads to confusion and defensiveness unless the leader has earned the trust and love of the congregation over time.

Barna and Viola write, “If truth be told, we Christians never seem to ask why we do what we do. Instead we blithely carry out traditions without asking where they came from.”<sup>50</sup> Schaller says that “the most effective way to influence both individual and institutional behavior is to ask questions and employ active listening.”<sup>51</sup>

Asking questions, seeking understanding, and honoring time-tested rituals are important activities for cross cultural missionaries. It is also vital for Incarnational ministry. Pastors, in small church culture can never be catalysts for meaningful transformation in any other way.

Schaller writes “the most serious shortage in our society is for skilled transformational leaders who possess the capability to initiate planned change from

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<sup>50</sup> Barna and Viola, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *The Interventionist* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1997), 11.

within an organization.”<sup>52</sup> He calls these leaders interventionists and they must have six qualities.

First they must have the willingness and capability to earn the trust of leadership in a congregation this usually requires good active listening skills. Second, these leaders must have credibility which develops through a combination of trust, experience, competence, Christian commitment, character, and authenticity. The third quality is a genuine openness to a range of diverse ideas and options; the fourth quality is that he or she must have the mind of a good chess player which enables them to plan multiple moves beyond the immediate decision. Another important quality is the capability and willingness to ask questions and analyze symptoms and behaviors and then be able diagnoses and suggest the appropriate prescription.

A good example of what not to do in a small church can be seen in the following account: At NZBC there was an element found in every Sunday morning worship service up until the researcher returned in 2006. For as long as anyone can remember, there had been a little white “church bank” located under the podium. Every Sunday morning, anyone who had celebrated a birthday or anniversary the previous week was recognized. Part of that recognition meant that they had to come forward and put pennies in the bank, one penny for each year of life or marriage! Then all would sing happy birthday (anniversary). At the end of the year the money was given to missions.

The pastor stopped that practice, which in retrospect was not the wisest thing to do. He did not ask to stop it. He did not even make a reference to the change on the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 15.

Sunday it occurred or offer and explanation. He just removed the practice. One Sunday it was there and the next, it was gone.

About two years later, an elderly deacon and charter member passed around a list of things that the pastor had done that proved he was a CEO type pastor. One of his examples was that the pastor stopped the birthday/anniversary recognition on Sunday morning without church approval!

There have been other changes. Some have been well- received. Others have been grumbled about. A few have been silently mourned. Some have been magically reinstated.

Over the past few years, the pastor has dismantled parts of NZBC's small church world (practices that were not bad, or immoral, or unchristian) and took them away without caring enough to find out, at least, the initial reasons some thing were done. There was little respect toward the flock, not even enough to honor and celebrate some of the things that they held dear simply because they did not make sense.

A small church will often keep doing the same things over and over again; simply because it is the way it has always been done. Even good programs or procedures that had meaning and purpose years ago are never evaluated, tweaked, or dropped as outdated or unnecessary. In light of the fact that small churches rarely adopt new patterns of behavior on their own it is important for small church leaders to find ways to introduce new things. If not, it is inevitable that "the repertoire of behaviors and activities available in a small church will decrease over time unless new ones are introduced."<sup>53</sup> So it is

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<sup>53</sup> Pappas, 81.

incumbent of small church leaders help their church evaluate behaviors and attitudes, in an effort to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

However in a small church, leadership must move slowly in evaluating and weathering changes that need to occur. Small churches that are healthy will change and grow. It is just a slow process. As frustrating as this can be, there is some consolation. Once the change is incorporated in to small church life, it has lasting impact. In fact that new way will become the way it is done. So, it is incumbent upon small church leaders to institute changes slowly and carefully because one way or another they will be remembered.

According to Pappas, a good leader must be able to look forward and cast vision but a good small church leader must also do something else:

The leader needs to perceive social and demographic trends, to register changes within the congregation, to be alert to new needs and opportunities for ministry and missions in the community and culture. However expecting the small church respond on the basis of a forward look is often unrealistic. This can be disorienting and debilitating. Having looked forward, effective small church leaders must step back into the world of history, heritage, memory, and tradition to scan the past for values and behaviors that are appropriate for the future.<sup>54</sup>

So with this in mind the researcher dug back into New Zion's church history for clues to unlock this church's culture. He continued to ask questions and he really tried to listen. He started evaluating programs, processes, and behaviors not in an effort to increase efficiency but in an effort to see if they contributed to a kingdom dream. Sometimes they did. Other times, they did not. There was also a re-examination of the pastor's life, motives, and preconceptions. Finally, a second look was taken of the so

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

called vision God had given for NZBC. In many ways, it was a fresh start. Finally, everyone seem to be the right path.

Several themes and stories continued to surface over and over in the church's historical narrative. They seem to hold the keys to change and the clues to the church's personality. These reoccurring themes and stories around have been instructive and enlightening.

#### The original church dedication prayer

On May 1, 1949 the church has a church dedication celebration. This was the opening prayer: "May we not look upon this day as one of triumph, but rather let us consider it as a day of thanksgiving to God and dedication of our energies, talents, and lives to His service. Let us pray that the dedication of this much needed building marks the beginning of an ever expanding ministry for the glory of God."<sup>55</sup>

That building (which is still standing) marked a symbolic beginning of a dream. That building was built and dedicated in thankfulness, dedication, and hope. It was a good dream. It still is as long at the church maintains a kingdom perspective. However, NZBC needed to be reminded that "Kingdom thinking will always challenge church thinking."<sup>56</sup> A kingdom dream has very specific qualities.<sup>57</sup> Redemption will always be the bottom line of a kingdom dream. Without it a church becomes a social club or a helping agency. Next, a kingdom dream always envisions God ruling. Loving service and obedience is the highest value in the individual or collective life of believers. Also, a

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<sup>55</sup> This prayer is recorded on the bulletin used on that day of dedication.

<sup>56</sup> Dale, 46-47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 37-38

kingdom dream makes Christ concrete. In other words, the church is the hands, feet, and heart of Christ in the world. This will be reflected in tangible ministry. A kingdom dream will also trigger growth and change.

NZBC's original dream contained all of these elements but somewhere along the way NZBC lost sight of that original dream. It seems that the dream has remained shackled to brick and mortar. Some call it an "edifice complex."<sup>58</sup> Church people often think that buildings will attract and keep people. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Much of the modern American church "presence and penetration into the culture"<sup>59</sup> is tied to real estate. In other words the focus is the growth of the institution and not the kingdom. It is a limited local mentality not a kingdom perspective. It is, implicitly understood that growing the congregation is the same as being part of Kingdom expansion. The two goals are not necessarily one in the same

In 2006 when the present facility was finally completed and the church celebrated another day of dedication, the pastor quoted that original prayer but he added another dimension to the dream. He picked up a single brick from the leftovers. Then, he had the following words inscribed upon them. "The vision is not complete just because a building is done."

### Old Innovations

In the early days of the church, before the new classrooms were built, two classes met in the auditorium. One was in the Northeast corner and one in the Southwest corner.

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<sup>58</sup> Barna and Viola, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

The young adult class met outside the church in the Northwest corner of the church where they got up as close as they could to the building. There were also Saturday night services that were held in those early days along with “in home” Bible studies. So even before these methods were considered “innovative” NZBC had multi-use space, weekend services, and cell groups! A longtime member wrote, “Everyone seemed to enjoy the fellowship around the Word of God, and the church flourished.”<sup>60</sup>

#### Those difficult family members

NZBC has a long history of individuals that were difficult to deal with. One long time member, remarked with a smile to this researcher, “Over the years New Zion has been once of the most tolerant churches I have ever known. My uncle was a real pistol and yet this church let him say and do things that would have gotten him kicked out of any other church. He could be a handful!”<sup>61</sup>

Here is example that is rather humorous. That man had a brother. These two brothers were members of a key family. They did not always get along. In time, a dispute arose that family members have long since forgotten the reasons for. But, the two brothers could not stand to be together with one another so they each had separate (but side by side) Sunday school rooms that they met in at various times. During those times, it was not unusual for these classrooms to only have these two men in them.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> This is from a written account of several recollections of a long-time church member, Neita Ramey.

<sup>61</sup> This quote came from a conversation with a long-time member, Raynell Glaser.

<sup>62</sup> From a conversation with Byron Caylor, long time member in an interview with the author.

NZBC has historically, valued congeniality (which is one of Pappas small church challenges) and it has come at a price. As with most small churches, NZBC has several extended families connected to the church. Because many are related to one another and the church sees itself as one big family, there is a fear of hurting one another's feelings or losing members. Therefore, individuals will choose not to say anything to anyone that might be construed as confrontational/divisive even though it may be needed. Many long-time members of NZBC tell stories that reflect a general sense of passive tolerance towards difficult church members over the years.

If it true that institutions ultimately rise and fall on the strength of relationships and “the sparks of volatile relationships can ignite firestorms” an understanding of human relationships” (both God given differences and effects of our fallen nature) is crucial. It appears that the church has been stuck in “stage one” of a possible firestorm as defined by Susek. He also came to realize that the church vacillated in and out of “phase one” of most of its existence.<sup>63</sup> This was because being nice and not causing a fuss was the modus operandi of this church.

When conflict comes up in small churches, few people know how to handle it. Progress is stalled in many small churches because the members have never learned to fight in a Christ-like manner. That is, they haven't learned to speak their truth with love, to strive for win-win outcomes, or to subordinate their positions to God's will. Malphurs says, “It is imperative that leaders communicate their message or cause to the masses...they are won over through communication.”<sup>64</sup> However, communication is not

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<sup>63</sup> Susek, 25-26.

<sup>64</sup> Malphurs, 62-63.

just strategic in vision casting and the implementation of change. More importantly, it is imperative for healthy relationships.

### Communication Barriers

In recent history, the biggest issues that are quietly struggled with are a lack of communication skills in relation to decision making and methodology. Through conversations with longtime members, several patterns have been uncovered.

Over the years resentment would wax and wane against church members with money, or voice, or family connections who made decisions (even good and needed ones) against the grain of the will, apathy, or actions of the church as a whole.

For example, there were times when a procedural issue needed to be addressed. Sometimes this involved a new issue that needed attention. Other times it was a change that needed to occur in an already established procedure. That vote would occur and the most outspoken members would make their case. The vote would occur. The majority would usually go along with the loudest voice and the change would be put in the church minutes. It may last for a few months, year, or maybe the tenure of a specific pastor. But sooner later, if the majority really did not care or felt differently, the vote would be promptly ignored or simply forgotten.

One long time member has often remarked that the best way do avoid doing something that you do not want to do it just put it off. It seems that individuals either alone or in alliance with several others would at times employ this method to impose a will or perspective on the church as a whole and everyone would smile along their merry way.

### Part-time preachers in a poor little church

Most pastors have stayed less than three years. Because of this, it is easy to see how the church could develop a passive philosophy in dealing with difficult people and decisions (including pastors). If there was a concern or distaste over something a pastor said or did, NZBC only had to patiently until the pastor was called to another church.

The expectation has always been that pastors will never stay long at NZBC. When this pastor left in 1999, he was given a plaque. It read, "In honor of your faithful service... We grew while you grew up." Being a training ground for pastors on a temporary assignment has been built into the psyche of NZBC.

The church reached its zenith in 1949. It did not have a full-time pastor until 1952. Since then, it has struggled to keep a full-time pastor and pay him a livable wage. The congregation has always operated the church on the assumption of limited resources. In other words they have always viewed themselves as small church with the resources to match!

Churches like NZBC can get a woe is me attitude. They feel the denomination does not care about them, that any new person who begins to attend their church will be lured away by larger ones. This is a curious (but understandable) fear. When 80 percent of American churches average less than 200 in worship attendance, then small churches are the norm and large churches are the exception.

In 2006, the church agreed to step out on faith and pay more than they had ever paid a pastor before. The pastor had come from a larger church and has taken a pay cut to return. It was also step of faith. However, this was done under the assumption that the

church would grow and finances would increase. That did occur for awhile, but it did not last.

In general, smaller churches have fewer resources than their larger counterparts. Budgets are smaller and there are fewer contributors. Usually there are one or two significant givers in the small church and this church is no exception. These people have tremendous influence in the life of the church for this very reason. At NZBC, there is one giver that gives 38% of the regular budget!

Studying NZBC's history has helped this pastor uncover many clues to aid in mapping a pathway into the future. Studying Church History has led this pastor to question many modern church practices. In the process some core convictions have been strengthened, changed, and modified.

Out of self-awareness flows purpose. What was true for a pastor is also true for a church. First of all, the church needs to continue to become self-aware concerning its God-ordained purpose and identity inside and outside the walls of the building. Secondly, the congregation needs to explore ways to build spiritual community through small groups and alternative worship experiences. Third, NZBC really needs to deal with the systemic problems concerning conflict and communication. Next, there must be an intentional shift towards "organic"<sup>65</sup> church life where organizational form is developed

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<sup>65</sup> Modern churches should not (and cannot) reproduce every aspect of NT church life. However, they should not ignore those things that are theologically and spiritually significant either. Viola makes a strong case that many of the organic forms and functions of the NT church are vital to healthy church life. He believes in open participatory meetings, observing the Lord's supper as a communal meal, church meetings that cultivate face to face interaction and mutual sharing and edification, emphasis on the unity of the church universal (which means a downplay or complete rejection of denominationalism) and plural oversight by seasoned believers, and decision making by

rather than imposed. Last of all, the church needs to explore ways to increase revenue and be better stewards of the resources God has given them.

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consensus building. Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church* (Ontario, Canada: David C. Cook Publishing, 2008), 246-252.

## CHAPTER 5

### AN EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS

#### *Hindsight and Observations*

After almost four years at NZBC, some things have changed. Some things have not. Progress has been made and progress has been lost. There has been success and failure. The church has adopted a mission statement, determined congregational values, developed action plans, organized around priorities, been exposed to pastoral vision, explored church history, evaluated community demographics, and completed a constitution (The by-laws are still in the works).

The majority of people voted to do the things that were done. Key leaders and core families were all on board. Early on, this process seemed to create new life at NZBC.

For a little over two years, the statistics suggested growth. Baptisms, attendance, and financial support were all increasing. But, life transformation was scant. People were joining, but most were coming from other churches. Some of them were good solid mature believers that have become important parts of the church family. But, most were simply church hoppers. There have been a few families that have come from non-church backgrounds, that are growing and maturing, but they came into the church family through small groups and existing relationships. The great majority of folks just seemed to be living life and doing church on autopilot.

As a whole, though painful to admit, most of the growth and activity has been superficial. Over the past few years much has been learned from struggles and successes. God has extended grace and the church has been patient. Along the way, people have begun praying and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. It seems that a new hopeful wind is blowing.

Through hindsight, there are several important observations that can be made. It is possible that there are other small church pastors that can benefit from the lessons learned.

Good organization is important for revitalization but it is not the key

NZBC (along with most small churches) is notoriously independent and suspicious of new programs and processes. They have seen pastors and plans come and go. In their minds they have survived precisely because they have not yielded to the winds of change.

Therefore a wise pastor will do well to remember that if he is going to be a catalyst for change, he must be willing to invest time and patience. He may have knowledge and expertise and the best resources, but those will not win him instant credibility. The process is guaranteed to be a long one and it is time consuming, relational, dynamic and organic in scope

Small churches are not rationally structured organizations. They are relationally oriented groups that function like a tribal society. Change will never occur if pastor is a culture crasher. He must enter into the small church culture as an Incarnational leader. He must be willing to invest time, patience, and prayer in a process that will last years.

Helping the church re-discover a kingdom dream is vital. Helping the church develop healthy relationships with God and each other will produce spiritual and emotional vitality that will result in growth.

Small churches need to cultivate kingdom thinking rather than church thinking

This generation is not concerned with helping the local church be a better organization. If they come to church at all they are looking for a place to connect with people in a meaningful way, to explore the implications of faith through a journey of discovery, a platform to run their lives on, and people that are making a difference.

McNeal writes of a coming reformation (A recovery of kingdom perspective) that reacts negatively to calls for people to become “church members in an effort to make the church successful and significant.” He believes many churches will lose when “the institutional loyalist’s money runs out.” He also writes, “People outside the church bubble are not waking up on Sunday morning hoping to find a church they can help make successful. They are not interested in creating institutional success.”<sup>1</sup>

In light of this reality believers must be intentional about living out their faith in the marketplace. They must be willing to build intentional relationships with pre-Christians. They must find creative and consistent ways to be the church seven days a week.

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<sup>1</sup> McNeal, 44.

There are many believers and pre-Christians that are willing to invest time, energy, gifts, and resources as long as it is towards something that they are passionate about and something that that is making a difference in the world. A good example of this reality is expressed in the reality of “pockets.”<sup>2</sup>

Small churches are going to have to get creative in cooperating with other churches, helping organizations, and ministries to increase impact. They have to get over just focusing on the ministries and programs that will help their congregations grow. If a congregation, no matter what its size spends the majority of it’s time, manpower, and financial resources on survival, it will increasingly become a shell of what God intended for it to be.

#### Small churches move ahead through exploration of the past

Every church is different. Each one has a heritage, history, and personality that is unique. To understand, explain, and exegete a small church culture, there are clue stories, redemptive lore, and cultural myths that help to explain why things are the way they are. They help the church deal with change and find meaning and purpose. They are the keys to unlocking the congregation’s future.

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<sup>2</sup> In every church there are at least six pockets of giving. In other words, there are people who have resources to put towards certain causes because they are passionate about those causes. If you do not tap those resources, you will lose them. If the church does not utilize these resources someone else will. Resources from one pocket will rarely go for the projects of another pocket. Leaders will never know what pockets parishioners have until they take the time to challenge their people to meet needs and make a difference according to Stan Tolar and Elmer Towns in *Developing a Giving Church* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1999), 101-102.

McManus writes,” that the key to cultural transition is not to bring something alien into a new culture, but to call out from within that culture, those things that are most true and right.”<sup>3</sup> Whatever those things are will be captured in the narrative history of a congregation.

In other words, small congregations struggle with what Pappas calls the “forward look.”<sup>4</sup> By necessity and calling, small church leaders must help their congregations move ahead. But, the best way to do this is to step back into the past and find appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and perspectives that will help them to do so.

This is a far cry from being stuck in the past. Any behavior, value, or goal that flows from the timeless principles found in a kingdom dream can be reinterpreted from one generation to the next. They also serve as anchors in the midst of transitional periods where out of healthy growth, new behaviors must be introduced.

Small churches are organized around the assumption of scarcity of resources

Americans will direct resources towards those things they are felt to be important or wanted. This is a fact. Resources are available for the things that matter or at least really wanted. Most people no longer live in a culture that is organized around a scarcity

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<sup>3</sup> McManus, 195.

<sup>4</sup> Pappas, 80.

of resources. The culture is overflowing with resources but the vast majority of small congregations are organized around an “assumption of scarcity.”<sup>5</sup>

Decision makers influence the future of the small congregation with a tendency to plan on the basis of a shortage of resources rather than from an assumption of untapped abundance. This is unfortunate because there is an abundance of untapped resources such as an abundance of gifted, skilled, deeply committed and creative people who are just waiting to be challenged. If the Bible is to be trusted, it states that God has prepared and provided so “that body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:1-16). In other words God provides each local church exactly what is needed to do what He desires for them to do.

Small church leaders must NOT do it all, on purpose

Mutual ministry, edification, and function were important indicators of spiritual health in the house churches of the first century. Small churches may have buildings, budgets, and paid staff yet they are still an organizational distant cousin of the house church. Leaders should experiment with various ways to help the congregation recapture the organic function of the local assembly as practiced in the first three hundred years of Christianity. In the New Testament there are over 50 references to the types of activities that church should practice with one another. This organic approach to gathered church practice resulted in growth and vitality in early church. The same can be true today. In

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<sup>5</sup> Schaller, *Small Church*, 14.

other words, small churches will thrive as their people realize they are needed, called, loved, and gifted for the edification of the church and evangelization of the world.

If this is going to happen, the small church pastor which often suffers from an inferiority complex in relation to his more successful (from a worldly point of view) peers needs to realize the possibility and flexibility of various realities that have been typically seen as a liability on the small church. If he can set aside his need to have his ego stroked by making himself indispensable, he might be surprised at what God does. In fact, if he can provide guidance in finding ways to help the church depend more on the Holy Spirit and each other more than the pastor, incredible things just might happen. If he does so, there is strong biblical support for such an approach. Robert Girard writes:

There is a thoroughly entrenched in the church system and unbiblical two caste system. In this system there is the clergy caste which is trained, called, paid, and expected to do the ministering. And there is the laity which normally functions as an audience which appreciatively pays for the performance of the clergy-or bitterly criticizes the gaping holes in that performance (there are always gaping holes). No one expects much of the lower or laity caste (except attendance, tithing, and testimony). And everyone expects too much of the upper or clergy caste (including the clergy themselves). The greatest problem in the whole business is the fact that the Bible's view of ministry *totally contradicts this system*.<sup>6</sup>

This may mean that he purposely becomes bi-vocational to help model to those in the congregation various ways to be a Christ-follower in the marketplace. Maybe he gives up his salary completely and gets another job to support his family. In doing do, he is not a burden on the small church budget (which releases resources for ministry). He can speak the truth in boldness and love without fear of losing his livelihood. He not only equips the church to do ministry but he also gives them the opportunity and freedom to

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 167.

do it. It may mean that he chooses to trust committees to meet without his presence. It may mean that he relinquishes the pulpit at times other than when he is on vacation. It may mean that he finds way to creatively cultivate broad-based participatory church life that minimizes the pervasive spectatorship that infects many congregations.

The biblical concept of leadership is by design more about function rather than identity. In other words, it is more relational than positional.

Leadership in the New Testament places a high premium on the unique gifting, spiritual maturity and sacrificial service of each member. It lays stress on function not offices. It emphasizes tasks more than titles. Its main concern lies in activities like pastor-ing, elder-ing, prophesy-ing, oversee-ing, and apostle-ing, etc. . . . To frame it another way positional thinking (on leadership) is hung up on nouns while functional thinking stresses verbs.<sup>7</sup>

#### Indigenous leadership is crucial in the small church

When an outsider attempts to lead the charge for change it is usually ineffective. However, small church pastors can still be catalysts for change. But, transformation will never occur unless the call comes from indigenous leadership. The key to transformation is the awareness that in the heart of a few people in every local expression of the true church beats God-given passion. Discovering and utilizing those people and the passions they have can set a congregation on fire from the inside out. McManus offers a brilliant observation:

In the present context, most pastors are, at best, welcome guests. They are what sociologists might call the acceptable outsider. As much as a pastor might love his congregation and have a deep sense of calling and commitment to its people, the nature of his position makes him a voice calling from the wilderness. It is essential, leading a church with an already established ethos into a new future, to call out

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<sup>7</sup> Viola, 154.

from within that community those who would hear the prophetic voice and respond by embracing the calling of God.<sup>8</sup>

Discipleship, evangelism, and ministry occur best through existing relationships

Service, ministry, and spiritual growth usually happen more organically in a small church. People are quick to care. Though it is true ministry and service are tied to local needs more than faraway needs. It is not that small church people do not care about those outside the community; they just are not top priorities. One exception to this rule is when a need is communicated through existing channels within the church. Someone's nephew is a missionary. A best friend's church building was destroyed in a tornado. Churches that make good use of these connections make a difference in the world. And as interconnected as the world is becoming, the opportunities are endless.

Along the same vein, relationships are extremely valuable in a small church. Much research has been done on the fact that small churches are relational in orientation. In fact, a better description of this orientation may be that the small church is interconnected on multiple levels. It is interesting that in a quantum world this is not only acknowledged but celebrated.

There are those that think that this is just the way things are in a small church and that this orientation hinders the process of organizational growth. There is ample evidence that this is true to an extent. If growth is to be primarily measured in increased baptisms, attendance, giving, facilities, and programs then the observation is sound.

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<sup>8</sup> McManus, 194.

However, if it is true that there are other measurements of growth that are just as important and yet harder to quantify then a re-assessment is needed. Is it possible to capitalize on the relational orientation of the small church? Is it possible to measure effectiveness in terms of personal transformation and community impact rather than efficiency and organizational expansion? This researcher believes the answer is yes. After all spiritual community is a vital aspect of church life and it is the biggest missing component in modern church life.

Though new people may find it difficult to find a place in existing community of believers, once they have made the transition, they are part of the group. If that group cultivates real spiritual community, transformation and impact occur. It is the conviction of this pastor that relationships are the key to everything essential in a local church.

When the researcher came back to NZBC in 2006, he had a question and answer time before he preached in view of a call. He asked a question of those that were in that meeting, “Within the next five years many of you who have loved and served this church for decades will be gone so what legacy do you plan to leave and how will that be accomplished?” In the Bible, it was incumbent upon one generation to pass on faith to the next generation. McDowell and Williams emphasize the need for mentoring and modeling:

This is how the next generation experiences the truth, in lives lived out loud in which they can participate. It is kind of a relational osmosis that is custom built for the post-modern mindset. They desperately need authentic role models that scream out the Jesus truth in every situation. Let their eyes see the truth in your life. Take the time for the one-on-ones, the invites home, the hanging out, and the friendship building. If that makes you feel uncomfortable, well, Sorry; but that is the Jesus way. It is called love.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> McDowell and Williams, 41.

Researchers acknowledge that the most natural way for people to come to know Christ and become more like Him is within the context of existing relationships. This is because mentoring and modeling are the best ways to facilitate spiritual growth within the context of a spiritual community. It is what Jesus did. It is what the early church did. It is what needs to occur in the church today.

### *Future Challenges Facing NZBC*

As NZBC moves forward there are many challenges ahead. However, challenges are different than sins, problems, and shortcomings. Challenges can result from strengths and weaknesses. Challenges can be obstacles and opportunities. This researcher believes that Pappas offers a good diagnostic framework that helps to explore many of the challenges small churches like NZBC faces. He states there are six.<sup>10</sup> McIntosh suggests several others.<sup>11</sup> Dean McIntyre offers eight.<sup>12</sup>

Several of these challenges affect NZBC. One is a club mentality. This is the idea that the organization is so inward focused and ingrown that new people and new ideas are

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<sup>10</sup> Small churches struggle with traditionalism, congeniality, club mentality, unhealthy conflict management, negative self-image, and property (and personnel) expense as cited in Pappas, 7-9.

<sup>11</sup> The obstacles to growth for a small church are: small church image, ineffective evangelism, inadequate programming, downward momentum, and ingrown fellowship as cited in *One Size*, McIntosh, 144.

<sup>12</sup> There are eight obstacles for the small church: psychology, facilities, leadership development, finances, use of technology, travel gap, burnout, limited talents and gifts as cited in Dean McIntyre, *The Small Church Primer: Strengths, Weaknesses, Worship, and Music In The Small-Membership Church*, www.gbod.org (2002), July, 2006.

not easily assimilated. Dale points out that when a church loses sight of a “kingdom dream, the by-product is always a club mentality.”<sup>13</sup> It is surprising how easy it is to embrace this identity. Think about it, a person must come in to a church to hear about God. He or she must go down to the local church to join before worship and service to God can be accomplished. The pastor is paid to be the illustrious potentate who oversees the functions of the club and mediates disputes between members. The church has its traditions, rituals, rules, and language that outsiders find strange and confusing. People are encouraged to attend meetings, pay weekly dues, and get involved. Occasionally there are charitable service projects to do and the meetings always open and close with prayer.

In team (committee) meetings several observations have been made. It is amazing the amount of discussion that centers around issues related to customer service and member benefits. It is also enlightening to see how much effort and resources are directed towards the comfort and care of member’s verses outreach and impact towards non-members.

Secondly, leadership is rarely cultivated and multiplied until a need arises. In a small church there seems to be very little effort given towards preparing for future leadership needs. Individuals, who are asked to take on a leadership role, usually develop their skills with on the job training on as needed basis. Existing leadership is tied to age, experience, and sometimes just simply, availability.

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<sup>13</sup> Dale, 8.

People are asked to take a position because a slot needs to be filled and not always in accordance to gifts and talents. On the positive side those who already find themselves in positions of influence and leadership often have ownership in a particular area. However, this can have a negative impact when those same individuals are unwilling (or unable) to see the possible leadership potential in another person and are unwilling (or unable) to mentor that person to take over one day. In other words, they take their jobs seriously and often have a hard time giving up that responsibility at the appropriate time.

There is often lip service given to need to pass the mantle to the next generation but that does not happen as effectively as it should.

The third challenge occurs in relation to the allocation of resources. The research states that in the average church, 80 percent of the work and financial support comes from 20 percent of the people. McIntosh believes a church is dying when 10 percent of the people are responsible for 90 percent of the work and finances.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, when a few people are providing most of the resources (manpower, time, money) burnout is inevitable.

In light of this, a proper application of stewardship must be addressed. The question is two-fold. How does a church increase revenue and resources and how can they become wise stewards of what they have?

### *Recommendations*

Lasting change may not occur for several years. It is critical to build a good foundation through a long term commitment, healthy relational patterns, and good

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<sup>14</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Next Level*, 76.

communication skills. Anderson has emphatically stated that modern church leaders face overwhelming expectations. “Some are hamstrung by antiquated ministry methods or leadership styles patterned after business models rather than after Jesus.” He also adds that “individualistic and consumer-minded church members often measure church leaders by a variety of competing and unrealistic standards.”<sup>15</sup> However, he is optimistic that change is occurring.

A new spirit of hope and growth is moving through churches across the country. Good things are already underway, and the unfolding possibilities far outstrip any current problems. Armies of Godly leaders are sensing the urgency of God’s mission and the rapidly changing terrain of the playing field, and they are seeking both heart and skills to lead their churches in the twenty-first century in the way that Jesus would want them to. Even more significant, the Christian community at large is beginning to rediscover the biblical design for spiritual leadership-in the form of surprisingly simple and doable models.<sup>16</sup>

Leadership assumptions have also changed. The pastor has assumed that he had been called to the church to help it grow. This has been replaced with the idea God has uniquely equipped him to help the people of NZBC become holistic followers of Jesus Christ. It was once thought that if a person comes to church enough, he or she will grow. Along the way if they take a course, memorize an outline, keep notes, listen to an expert, apply a formula, and attend a conference then growth and change occur. If they are saturated with enough information about Christianity through sermons and Sunday school lessons they will mature. But in all reality, this approach produces very little real lasting change. A change in strategy has been suggested. In fact, NZBC is experimenting with a strategy that replaces a didactic model with a dialogical mode of learning.

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.

“The academic model for the last several hundred years involved an expert (teacher) who has information and disseminated it to the less informed (student).”<sup>17</sup> In the modern world, a student has access to vast amounts information on the internet. It is more information than any one expert can share in a whole course. Even now, a person who wants to learn (as opposed to getting a degree) can do so through institutions of higher learning such as MIT who offer free lecture notes, exams, and videos for over 1900 courses to anyone who desires to access them.<sup>18</sup> In a church influenced by modernism, “spiritual formation was thought to be accomplished by taking a student through a prescribed group of texts that addressed topics in a curricular approach.”<sup>19</sup>

In nationwide survey, one study shows that there seems to be very little difference between the behavior, morality and ethics of religious young people as compared to their non-religious friends.<sup>20</sup> Barna’s research says that 98% of young people who profess to be born again do not reflect Christ-like behaviors.<sup>21</sup>

In other words the didactic teaching method is not aiding the next generation in the absorption of truth in their lives. They may know some facts about God and faith but they do seem to be experiencing a relationship with God through faith. Young adults are bombarded with so much information on a constant basis. They do not need access to

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<sup>17</sup> McNeal, 84.

<sup>18</sup> *Mitopencourseware*, <http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/home/home/index.htm>. (accessed January 4, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> McNeal, 84-85.

<sup>20</sup> Josephson Institute of Ethics, "The Ethics Of American Youth," *2002 Report Card*, <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/> (accessed January 5, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> George Barna, *Think Like Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2003), 26.

more information; they need to help in discernment and application. “It is hard to pitch facts and make them meaningful across the chasm of skepticism indifference.

Relationships provide the effective bridge. In relationships the truth of God is exposed simply because God is alive and working in a person’s life and this causes young people to sit up and take notice.”<sup>22</sup> This generation needs to see a demonstration of the how the truth of knowing Christ makes a difference in life. They desire a place to seek answers while they experience acceptance of the fact that they are at only a certain point in the journey.

Relationships are also the conduits that enable the next generation sort through information as well as observe and experience life-changing truth. One of the key component in what Larry Crabb calls “connecting relationships” or “spiritual community”<sup>23</sup> is the power of dialogue.

To help people come to know Christ and experience ongoing spiritual formation, churches must become the places where movement towards Christ-likeness can be encouraged through dialogue and relationship. McNeal suggests that there needs to be a shift in the “methodology”<sup>24</sup> of spiritual formation. From a secular perspective, Jane

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<sup>22</sup> McDowell and Williams, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Crabb, 18-20.

<sup>24</sup> Spiritual formation occurs when there is authentic worship, application of Biblical truth to life and relationships, ministry and service in Jesus name, sharing faith with pre-Christians, Cooperation with other believers in the Mission of God. But, it will occur best if the church can engage in the process of spiritual formation by shifting from teaching to learning, being text driven to life driven, from classroom to living room, from didactic to experiential, from learning as a private affair to a team environment, from scripted to shaped as cited in McNeal, 80-91.

Vella offers a similar strategy of “dialogue education” developed out of an understanding of “quantum concepts.”<sup>25</sup>

Dialogue, customized learning, redemptive relationships, organic spiritual growth, and meaningful service and ministry, seem from this pastors perspective to be easier to implement in a small church than in a larger one precisely because of size and the relational orientation of these congregations.

Dialogue in many small church situations is already desirable and encouraged. The give and take, question and answer format is quite close to what already exists at NZBC in every area but the Sunday morning worship service. The distance between pastor and people is not a huge chasm in these church and smaller congregations can experiment with ways to close the gap even more. They want their pastors approachable and available. There is a great opportunity for mentoring and modeling in terms of discipleship.

Small churches can easily customize learning to the needs of individuals. Uniqueness (even quirkiness) is accepted if not celebrated in many of these congregations. Knowing family history and life stories is a given in small church life. In fact, it can be an obstacle. However, when rightly applied, there is a great opportunity to adapt the discipleship process as needed in people’s lives.

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<sup>25</sup>According to Vella, Newton held a view of the universe as a vast machine that could be dissected and discovered. This mechanistic worldview sees the whole as merely the sum of its parts. From this came classical, hierarchical education. Quantum concepts have changed her understanding of education. The six concepts that inform her postmodern perspective are relatedness, a holistic perspective, duality, ambiguity, participation, and energy as cited in Jane Vella, 29-35.

Smaller churches struggle with allocation of resources. Because of this many may be forced to become creative in raising capital, facility use, and employing pastors. When at least half, and it is usually more, of the financial resources go towards paying staff and talking care of buildings, congregations need to take a hard look at stewardship (that is the use of finances, time, facilities, manpower etc).

In the case of NZBC the 2009 budget proposed in January 2009 is illustrative. The church affirmed a budget of \$183,130.00. By November of 2009, \$136,800.00 had been spent on personnel and property. This means that only 51% went to staffing, 25% went toward property needs and only 25% of the budget for the year went towards everything else! In just the basic costs of keeping the facilities and paying a pastor can be overwhelming to small churches. McIntosh says that the priority for expenditure of money should be in order of “staff, ministries, and buildings.”<sup>26</sup> He also says that for small churches, salaries should comprise no more than 50% of operating budget.

For the 2010 budget, there were adjustments that put NZBC more in line with these recommendations. The total budget was comprises of \$171,473.00. Salaries comprise \$59,724.00 (35%). Ministry costs make up \$62,941.00 (37%). Building needs are projected to cost \$48,808.00 (28%).

However the recommendations are based on several assumptions. First for all there is the assumption that a building is an integral part of church life (and by default debt and overhead are assumed). Secondly, there is an assumption that paid staff are necessary to the function of the church. Third, there is an assumption that what happens

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<sup>26</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Church That Works* (Grand Rapids: MI, BakerBooks, 2004), 131

when the average church meets together is completely biblical. Maybe it is time to question, or at least tweak those assumptions. In light of these realities there are several recommendations that this researcher will be making in the days ahead.

First of all, the church is \$100,000 dollars in debt and this is a struggle. If NZBC believes that the building they have has been God-given, then they need to be proactive in eliminating the debt as soon as possible.

Second, the average church (NZBC is no exception) has unlimited discipleship space! They are called homes. Small groups and in-home bible studies have been quite effective over the past two summers, the church needs to incorporate them into a more holistic part of the life of NZBC as opportunities for outreach and spiritual community.

Third, there are unlimited opportunities for evangelism. They are found, of course outside the walls of the church building. Therefore, the church needs to find practical and tangible ways to minister to this community. This along with mission emphasis that flows from existing relationships and opportunities will energize the church as the body of Christ in the world.

Fourth, NZBC cannot provide a program for every need. However, holistic family ministry needs to be embraced. A small church can be quite effective in strengthening families by coming along side them to help them in practical and concrete ways.

Fifth, healthy conflict management and good communication skills need to be learned. This is the primary systemic issue at NZBC. Healthy relationships between God and each other are absolutely crucial.

Also, it is important for NZBC to re-assess resource allocation. Alternative methods to raise (or release) needed funds and manpower must be explored (such as bivocational ministry).

Finally, dialogue must be incorporated into all aspects of church life from the worship service to discipleship. Mature believers (not just the pastor) needs to mentor, model, and equip in all aspects of church life.

### *Conclusion*

Astronomers have discovered that light travels at 186,000 mps. Most of the distant stars observed in the night sky beyond this solar system are so far away that it takes light years for their image to reach an observer on planet earth. In short, the stars that a person observes in the night sky are amazing pictures from the past. When a star dies, by the time it can be seen on planet earth it has been dead for millennia. Songs have been sung, Kisses have been stolen, oceans have been crossed, and worship has been experienced while humans have gazed at the stars. But, they are only amazing snapshots of the past. The Psalmist declares that the heaven declare his handiwork (in the past). Yet the gospels remind believers that they should also fix their eyes on the one who is the Author and Finisher of the faith who is the source of our hope of glory.

Small churches should honor the past, they cannot live in it. They must build a strong foundation on the bedrock of Biblical truth. They must incorporate forms and function that communicate in a specific culture but transcend every culture. They must be open to the new things that God promises to do while clinging to the timeless

truths of the Christian faith. They have the capacity. The Holy Spirit has made certain that they do.

It was Pappas who said, “Certain small churches have a future. Others do not. Those that can rediscover joy, those that reconnect people to their God-given purpose, those that can love others, those that can preserve the spirit of their heritage will have a glorious future. But those that fail to do so will wither away.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, if a congregation is willing to turn its gaze from pictures of the past to a future hope, then the future is bright.

Yet, every church has unique strengths, struggles, personalities and blind spots. Small church leaders must understand this. If the leaders of these small congregations patiently and lovingly get to know the congregations they are called to lead; If they are willing to truly love them as they are then they have a shot at helping them become what God intends. If they are willing to shepherd these churches through the difficult transitions that are already occurring in the culture, while helping them to maintain Missional focus and kingdom perspective, then God will be honored and meaningful growth will occur.

This is what seems to be happening at NZBC. The journey is far from over. The future may be bright but it is filled with uncertainty. However, it is a hope-filled uncertainty that is firmly grounded in promises of Scripture, the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the finished work of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>27</sup> Pappas, 37-140.

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## VITA

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### PERSONAL

Born: March 2, 1969

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### EDUCATIONAL

B.S., Francis Marion University, 1991.

M.Div., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995.

### MINISTERIAL

Ordination: September 12, 1993, Lakeview Baptist Church, Hartsville, South Carolina.

### PROFESSIONAL

Pastor, New Zion Baptist Church, Bonham, Texas, 1994-1999.

Chaplain, Sam Rayburn Memorial VA Hospital, 1997-1998

Associate Pastor, Colonial Heights Baptist Church, Colonial Heights, Virginia,  
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Pastor, New Zion Baptist Church, Bonham, Texas, 2006-present.