

Liberty University School of Divinity

Declining Inner-City Church Membership: Creating Spiritually Healthy Inner-City Churches  
through Acts 2:42-47

A Thesis Project Submitted to  
The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

By

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**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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# DECLINING INNER-CITY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP: CREATING SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY INNER-CITY CHURCHES THROUGH ACTS 2:42-47

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Liberty University School of Divinity, 2019

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## **Churches Are Declining in the Inner-City**

Multi-ethnic, inner city churches are declining in membership. This premise is validated through surveys of inner city church leaders and rigorous academic reviews from books, theses, dissertations, and peer-reviewed journal articles that discuss typical church problems in multi-ethnic, inner-city churches. Corroborated by applied research (qualitative and quantitative surveys), and academic research, this thesis project proposes a biblical solution to the problem of declining membership in the form of a step-by-step practical church model based on Acts 2:42.

Abstract Length: 77 words

## DEDICATION

To Holy Spirit-driven men and women who have left their imprint in the sands of the inner-city, perpetuating the Good News of Jesus Christ, for those who have documented their experiences for those presently seeking to make impactful indentations, for future generations who desire to stand on their shoulders and make their marks, and for those who are following in their footprints leading to Christ. To a great mentor and a great prayer warrior, Dr. Michael C. Whittington, my mentor and professor at Liberty School of Divinity.

## Contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Ministry Context .....	1
The Problem: Decline of the Inner City Church .....	4
Limitations .....	6
Theoretical Basis .....	7
Methodology .....	8
Review of Literature: Scholarly Books and Articles .....	9
Review of Literature: Pertinent Biblical Passages .....	24
Summary .....	31
<b>Chapter 2: Declining Inner-City Churches: Survey Results and Research Process .....</b>	<b>34</b>
Sampling Description.....	35
Methodology .....	35
Reason for the Survey .....	36
Survey Construction.....	36
Conclusion .....	49
<b>Chapter 3: Academic Analysis Supports Survey Analysis.....</b>	<b>51</b>
Millennials and Seniors – Trend One .....	54
Partial Model Lacking Devotion and Scriptural Integrity – Trend Two .....	62
Signs of a Healthy Church – Trend Three .....	67



<b>Chapter 4: The Solution – The Acts 2:42 Model</b> .....	74
Part One – The Model.....	74
Part Two – Epilogue .....	107
Bibliography .....	109
Appendix A: Sample Letter to Survey Participants .....	117
Appendix B: IRB Approval .....	118

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Ministry Context**

Multi-ethnic, inner city churches are in decline and need to apply the biblical pattern of the New Testament church – Christians devoted to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.<sup>1</sup> The author of the first Gospel writes,

Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few’ (Matt 9:35-36).

This passage describes the church’s ministry target, the condition of the target group, and what Christ desires of the ministry. In the present imagery, God has become the owner-manager of the farmland, which employs farm workers to harvest the crop. There is an urgent need to collect the crops before they spoil.

In September 1998, a decision was made by a select group of Christian prayer-warriors to plant a multi-ethnic, inner-city church. With a desire to reach people for Christ, the author of this thesis took ownership of the opportunity and was adamant that the challenges of multi-ethnic, inner-city ministry would not stand as a roadblock preventing people in that demographic from knowing Christ. The Matthean passage describes the author’s personal passion, especially for preaching and teaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>Acts 2:42.

The motivations were heartfelt: a strong ambition to go where many mainline suburban churches were reluctant to take the gospel, a desire to disciple the existing churches to eradicate church decline, and the desire to go beyond the social gospel. The goal was to apply Christian ethics to poverty, slums, poor nutrition, inadequate education, alcoholism, crime, and war; thereby, evangelizing the lost (Matt.28:19-20).

Caution had to be taken so that the ministry would not exclusively focus on the social gospel at the expense of the spiritual gospel (Jn. 6:35); however, at the same time, the ministry's demographic consisted of people with significant physical needs (Matt 25:34-40; 22:39; Lk 16:19-31). People need their hearts filled with the love of Christ, but often that love can only be felt when the church engages them through their felt and personal needs.

The author experienced a life no different from those targeted in his ministry context and felt a deep feeling of conviction. Having contributed to the demise of inner-city communities through many moral failures (during pre-Christian era), he was compelled by the Holy Spirit (after accepting Christ) to return to the same inner city setting; this time, to make a difference for Jesus Christ.

Coined by S. M. Lockridge, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in San Diego (1952-1993), "It's Friday, but Sunday's comin'" is metaphor for the pain and death that Jesus suffered on Good Friday, but Sunday was just around the corner – the glorious day of resurrection of new life.<sup>2</sup> It served as the perfect description for the newly established inner city church.

Sinful conditions, often found in the inner city, contribute to an unhealthy and declining church, but the church can be revitalized with "Sunday comin.'" The phrase "Sunday's comin'"

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<sup>2</sup> Shadrach Meshach Lockridge (March 7, 1913 – April 4, 2000) was the Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, a prominent African-American congregation in San Diego, California, from 1953 to 1993. He was known for his preaching across the United States and around the world. Wikipedia Encyclopedia. Dibble, Sandra (8 April 2000). The San Diego Union-Tribune. p. B1. Retrieved 15 December 2009.

also references a time in the future when All Nations Christian Church, the multiethnic, inner-city church planted by the prayer warriors and the author of this paper, ministers within and without as a spiritually healthy church to people in the community.

The challenge was enormous, far more than the church leadership expected. The Bible states, “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Gal. 6:7). The reaping was initially rooted in the writer’s heart. It makes one’s heart heavy to think about one’s influence that contributed to the downfall of peoples’ lives, but the desire to make a difference continued to surface. Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby understood this condition well; “people’s life experiences can dramatically affect the caliber of leaders they become.”<sup>3</sup>

In the context of this thesis, the first “Sunday’s comin” proved to be the most emotionally painful, when the author faced the same people he had closely encountered as an unbeliever – now as a new creation in Christ and their pastor. Though some were leery, many embraced the pastor, attending the weekly services because they had someone who could identify with their sin and understand their pain.

The next “Sunday’s comin” was the phase in the ministry when the neighborhoods began to share their hidden secrets – vices, corruption, and immoralities of every kind. Though common to most inner cities, this location proved to be one of the worst. With the transient nature of an inner city, some well-meaning Christians viewed the church as an emergency room, hospital, bank, or social service; not a home for spiritual healing. This misunderstanding of the purpose of the Lord’s church often exacerbates an already prevalent decline in the membership and worship attendances of inner-city churches.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God’s Agenda* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010). 51.

Awaiting a genuine “Sunday’s comin,” the aforementioned inner city church suffered deteriorating spiritual health and decline for three reasons. First, the ministry did not understand the extent of the physical or spiritual pain of the inner city community. Second, the church lacked a biblical model for ministering to these people. Third, they came with their own spiritual and personal agendas, and they came holding onto lifestyles insensitive to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Denominational parochialism abounded and each leader within the planted church had a personal agenda of what the church should be doing to fit within their theological boundaries. As a result, worship styles varied to the point of division and the Bible was seldom consulted. The style of praise music piqued some attendees’ interests, yet true worship of God did not register on their spiritual radar. Some chose fellowship while ignoring discipleship, and the apostles’ teaching was not given equal attention as other principles. “Today is Friday” seemed all too frequent, while “Sunday’s comin” seemed to never materialize; that is, until the leadership discovered the biblical model of Acts 2:42-47. Once applied – the premise of this thesis – spiritual health improved, the church grew, and the needs of the community were addressed. This thesis proposes a “Sunday’s comin,” a time of renewal, resurrection, and new life for the inner city church.

### **The Problem: Decline of the Inner City Church**

Unhealthy churches are churches in numerical and spiritual decline. Conversely, healthy churches are churches growing in numbers and Christian maturity; but what does spiritual maturity look like? Bill Wilson, in his well-written article, “What Does a Healthy Church Look Like,” shares how some churches base spiritual health on characteristics of their congregations, such as clarity of mission and vision, transformational conflict, authentic community, and

transparent communication.<sup>4</sup> Churches that have a mission and vision know where the church is going and how to get there.

Michael Beasley states that healthy churches, identified as those that are “energized by faith,” have an “outward-looking focus” and “seek to find out what God wants.” They “face the cost of change and growth ... operate as a community ... make room for all ... and do a few things and do them well.”<sup>5</sup> When basing the marks of healthy churches on empirical research into the characteristics of growing churches, pains must be taken to demonstrate that they are not merely pragmatic but are consistent with values expressed by Christ. Beasley also makes an excellent point about how church health is an enemy of church decline. The author concluded that good churches exist to express the values of Christ and combat the deterioration of worship services caused by avoiding biblical principles modeled in the ancient church.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis proposes a biblical model to help sustain multi-ethnic, inner-city churches that do not have a definite biblical model. A spiritually healthy church is one that operates on biblical principles capable of ministering in multi-ethnic inner-city environments and holds firm to the principles demonstrated in the early church, as described in Acts 2:42-47, as a safeguard against churches having problems with decline.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of the project is to create a ministry context that can reach men and women of all ages and ethnicities, irrespective of socio-economic status or education. Each person has diverse talents that can help the body of Christ; moreover, each person is created *imago Dei*, and

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Wilson, “What Does a Healthy Church Look Like?” *Review & Expositor* 113, no. 3 (2016): 333-40.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Beasley, *Robert Warren, The Healthy Churches Handbook: A Process for Revitalizing Your Church*, vol. 116 (London, England: SAGE Publications, 2013), 176.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

as such, longs for spiritual fulfillment found only in Jesus Christ. To introduce them to Christ, allowing God to add them to His church (Acts 2:47) is the goal of the inner city model. The message of Christ is needed to bring balance to the lives of those most victimized by poverty – ex-felons, drug addicts, and the disenfranchised. It is imperative that multi-ethnic, inner-city churches maintain spiritual health for the sake of the kingdom of God, meeting the spiritual needs of the people, and the health of the inner-city community in general.

David M. Byrd believes in order for church membership nationwide to grow, inner-city churches need to grow.<sup>8</sup> The world is becoming increasingly and rapidly urban. One need look no further for evidence to support a rapidly increasing urban population than the statistical threshold crossed in 2010. It documented that more than half of the world's population lived in cities, for the first time in recorded history. By the year 2025, sixty-five percent of the world's population is predicted to live in cities. By 2050, seventy-nine percent of the world's population of 8.88 billion will live in cities of 10,000 or larger.<sup>9</sup> Church leaders ministering in multi-ethnic inner-cities have opportunities to increase membership; however, church decline is rapidly increasing due to both population growth and the depravity of the inner city.

### **Limitations**

There are factors limiting the scope of this project. First, the paper is not a comprehensive study on eliminating decline in all multi-ethnic, inner-city churches because no two multi-ethnic, inner-city churches have identical ministries, nor do any two inner-city churches target the same demographic. It is fair to say that multi-ethnic, inner-city churches share many of the same desires and have many of the same goals, but no two use the same methods or biblical models.

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<sup>8</sup> David M. Byrd, "The Multiethnic, Multicongregational Church: Developing a Model for Urban Churches Revitalization" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The problem of the decline of the inner-city church, and its subsequent solution – the biblical model of Acts 2:42-47 – is the focus of this thesis.

The study includes a representative of churches totaling around 3,000 in membership in cities with populations of 500,000 or more. The project is limited to multi-ethnic, inner-city ministry. It is not a study of predominately affluent Caucasian, African-American, Asian, Hispanic, located in outlining suburbs, even if they are declining. The focus is the inner city, where residents perpetually experience challenges of sexual immorality, spiritual confusion, poverty, and emotional problems. These are the people contributing to the decline of the inner city churches. A further limitation (though intentional) is that this study focused on church leaders with personal experience in inner city churches where memberships are rapidly declining or have already closed their doors to the public.

### **Theoretical Basis**

With an appalling lack of current best practices for successful inner city churches, Acts 2:42-47 serves as the main theoretical basis for the project. The return to this biblical model is essential in creating a healthy inner city church. Bill Wilson observes that “something significant is changing in local church life. We are entering a time of winnowing for congregations, in which a congregation’s core health must mean the difference between survival and death, and whether it merely survives or thrives in the future.”<sup>10</sup> Many multi-ethnic inner-city churches are in a phase in which its methodology for growth must change to survive. The motivation to see churches stop declining and start growing in multi-ethnic inner-cities is the driving force of the research project.

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<sup>10</sup> Wilson, “Healthy Church,” 330-340.



In Acts 2:42-47, Luke describes specific elements in the early church that created growth. The new-born church in its prime possessed a purity of devotion to the risen Lord unmatched in succeeding generations. It is worth quoting Luke at length here:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had a need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

By using the text and comparing it to the relevant literature, a theoretical framework is created, which is helpful for understanding the challenges of multi-ethnic inner-city churches.

The value of collecting and interpreting applied research – qualitative and quantitative surveys – contributed to the theoretical basis. Data collected through surveys clearly supported the premise that the inner city, multi-ethnic church is in serious decline, and unless something is done to remedy the problem, the inner city church may cease altogether.

### **Methodology**

Chapter one introduces the problem, the corroborating evidence from both applied and academic research, and proposes the solution – the biblical model from Acts 2:42-47. Church leaders from twenty inner city churches were contacted for input and provided a robust data sample which, in turn, was substantiated by existing scholarly research.

The second chapter investigates research data collected for the study and explores in greater detail how the study was constructed, how participants were identified, contacted, and surveyed, and how their contributions to the research data, collected. Graphs and written analyses supporting the premise is also to be found within chapter two. The findings among the

surveyed participants are coded, summarized and point to common trends among the churches sampled.

The third chapter garners the scholarly support essential to a study of this depth. Corroborating the applied research, are similar surveys and material provided by scholars and published church leaders. The trends summarized in chapter two are common to other declining churches, and analyzed from an academic perspective, validating the claims of decline among the multi-ethnic, inner-city churches.

The fourth chapter proposes the biblical solution; namely, the model of the New Testament church as recorded in Acts 2:42-47. The recommended model presents a step-by-step teaching plan for pastoral leaders to use as a guide to building a healthy church family, thereby solving the issue of a declining church. The chapter closes with an overall summary of the entire thesis.

### **Review of Literature – Scholarly Books and Articles**

Creating a spiritually healthy church in the multi-ethnic, inner-city is dependent on the early church model in Acts 2:42-47. An understanding of the relevant literature and biblical exegesis were essential to this task.

Charles W. Dunn in *Is America a Christian Nation?* connects the assumption that America is a Christian nation, yet uninfluenced by Christ as the evidence of overall church decline across denominational and nondenominational lines. Dunn acknowledges initially that, “yes,” America is a Christian nation, but only in the broadest sense of its formal, demographic identity. Second, “no,” America is not a nation of Christians in any strong traditional meaning of that term—not in moral guidance, not by doctrinal creed, not by cultural behavior. Third, “yes, sort of,” America is a nation powerfully influenced by Christianity, both in its legal institutions

and its political ethos. As many of the nation's Founding Fathers hoped, in the free marketplace of religious competition, America might someday become a nation of many Christians. Fourth, as judged by Christianity itself, America is not and cannot be a Christian nation. The Scripture calls for believers, not institutions or collective entities, in such a religion to live holy lives. In other words, only individuals can be Christian. America, like every other worldly power, is an incommensurate, inferior thing. Hence, if one takes their religion seriously as it presented itself in human form, the answer to *Is America a Christian Nation* is "no, America is not a Christian nation."<sup>11</sup> Christians in America have exaggerated what it means to be Christian and those with an exaggerated view of what Christianity looks like show decline in identifying with a Christian. The combination of both summaries no doubt trickles down to church attendance nationwide.

Mary Eberstadt wrote a helpful book, *How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization*. The book is helpful because the author expresses that, in certain parts, the West is indeed significantly more secular and less influenced by Christianity, parts that have been mostly Christian for much of the past two millennia including even in the relatively recent past. The author makes a strong claim that secularization rings true to those who toil in certain Western cultural institutions where God has since been sent packing with a vengeance; as a result, Western Christianity is in decline.<sup>12</sup>

Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird in *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* write a helpful book that focuses on the future state of declining and dying churches. They describe how Protestant churches across the United States are struggling, declining, or dying. Most of

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<sup>11</sup> Charles W. Dunn., ed. *The Future of Religion in American Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 89. <https://ebookcentral-proquest.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/reader.action?ppg=96&docID=792335&tm=1539094457103>

<sup>12</sup> Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God: A New Theory of Secularization* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2013), 60-88. Accessed October 9, 2018. Liberty E-book Central.

these churches have fewer than two hundred people in attendance, a good portion fewer than seventy-five people a week. Too many of these churches are focused on maintaining dilapidated buildings and struggling to survive rather than transforming their communities. Roughly 3,000 of these churches (one percent of all churches in America) have permanently closed their doors.<sup>13</sup>

Wayne E. Rogers, in “Overcoming Church Euthanasia: A Plan to Revitalize Dead and Dying Churches,” writes,

It is rare for a long-term church member to see erosion in his or her church. Growth may come rapidly, but a decline is usually slow, imperceptibly slow. Slow erosion is the worst type of decline for churches because the members have no sense of urgency to change, decline due to the success of the past’s glory years, meaning no one wants to change. The expression ‘we have never done it that way before’ became an epic line of the churches in history that lacked enough faith to try new ways.<sup>14</sup>

Churches refusing to try new ways result in death, rejection of hospitality to the community, stewardship, and generosity fail to meet sacrificial levels for the sake of Christ. Before the members realize it, they have slowed, then stopped going into all the world as stated in the Great Commission. Citing Thomas Rainer, Rogers argues that the fault rests with the lack of biblical direction.<sup>15</sup>

In *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Devers suggests that the popular models of church growth are part of the cause of church health decline. He proposes a new model based on nine marks: expository preaching, encountering God’s truth, exploring the Christian message, understanding a biblical view of conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship, and recovering a biblical understanding of church leadership.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jim Tomberlin, and Bird Warren. *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012), 24. Accessed October 11, 2018. Liberty E-book Central.

<sup>14</sup> Wayne E. Rogers, "Overcoming Church Euthanasia: A Plan to Revitalize Dead and Dying Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention" (DMin thesis, Liberty University Theses, 2015), 40-45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Devers, *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 1997). 31-249

According to Georden Hammond, these same biblical traditions served John Wesley well when establishing healthy churches in Georgia wilderness. Hammond describes, in his book on Wesley, how the church leader used traditional church practices to create a thriving church despite all the challenges.<sup>17</sup>

In his article, “What does a healthy church look like?” Bill Wilson shows how difficult it can be describing a healthy church. The author discusses two faulty ways of conducting research on church health: either overly broad and expansive such that it is not sufficiently descriptive for research models, or so small and prescriptive in ways that favor a particular theology, worship tradition, and organizational structure.<sup>18</sup>

Rick Warren, in *The Purpose Driven Church*, describes five dimensions of a healthy church taken from the New Testament. Warren goes so far as to argue that church health, not church growth, are vital issues churches face in the twenty-first century. Warren states that as churches become engaged in fellowship, desire stronger discipleship, worship, ministry, and evangelism, their health improves. He recognizes these sentiments as being present in Acts 2:42-47.<sup>19</sup> Warren further stated that God wants his church to grow. If churches in the leader’s context are genuinely healthy, there is no need to concern oneself with numeric growth.

Angelo Logan in his dissertation “Essential Strategies for Leaders to Develop Healthy church” stated that Rick Warren found that church health has been on the decline, though Logan’s work centers too much on physical rather than spiritual health. For Logan, what is most

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<sup>17</sup> Georden Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 160.

<sup>18</sup> Bill Wilson, “Healthy Church,” 333-40.

<sup>19</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 17.

needed for a healthy church is the production of disciples, since unhealthy churches do not produce healthy disciples.<sup>20</sup> It is possible to raise the argument that such a definition does not consider the church's role in a community, particularly a multi-ethnic inner-city community where churches face more problems than whether or not they produce any disciples. This thesis claims that a healthy church is rooted in the foundations of the historical church that Luke describes in Acts 2:42-47. Returning to these historical roots places the church as a dynamic entity within the community rather than a static one.

In *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, Peter Scazzero suggests seven principles for improving the health of the church by centering it on the spiritual health of church leaders. These principles are as follows: (1) look beneath the surface of one's problems; (2) break free from past wounds, failures, sins, and circumstances; (3) live life embracing brokenness and vulnerability; (4) recognize and keep to one's limitations and boundaries; (5) embrace grief and loss; (6) let incarnation become your model to love others; and (7) be patient to lead with integrity.<sup>21</sup>

In an article written by Lenny Luchetti in *Leadership Journal*, the author concluded that the leader's personal and spiritual health made a dramatic impact on his church. The author found that pastoral turnover is often caused by unhealthy patterns in churches and explains that these problems also affected him and his congregation's relationship with God. Luchetti discovered that a healthy pastor inevitably leads to a healthier church. There is value in pastors seeking personal improvement; centering church health on only the pastor ignores how churches

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<sup>20</sup> Angelo Logan, "Essential Strategies for Leaders to Develop a Healthy Church" (DMin diss., Liberty University School of Divinity, 2017), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013). 71-216.

are held up by their community as well. Pastors play a central role in leading the community, but they are not the entire community.<sup>22</sup>

In his article, Steve McMullin presents research findings that show one of the primary causes of church decline is competition with secular activities such as sports activities, work schedules, and shopping. McMullin found that 21.3% of respondents to an open-ended survey cited as the main reason church attendance was in decline. The repeal of “blue laws” that kept stores closed on Sundays resulted in people working and/or shopping on Sundays, and children’s athletic activities scheduled on Sunday mornings during a time when many churches traditionally provide religious education and services. Based on a study of 16 mainline and conservative Protestant congregations in decline, the article considers the effect—both real and perceived—of the secularization of Sunday on congregations with declining worship attendance.<sup>23</sup> Acts 2:42-47 challenges the problem of secularism by pushing a congregation to see that these secular activities and many of the desires behind them can be fulfilled by the church instead, which would, in turn, bolster the church. The fellowship emphasized in Acts 2:42-47 can more than make up for the communal teamwork and pursuits that weekend activities and sporting events provide.<sup>24</sup>

John P. Marcum, in “Measuring Church Attendance: A Further Look,” conducted studies of Protestants and Catholics in the U S and found that estimates of worship attendance based on individual survey reports yield significantly higher totals than independent estimates based on

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<sup>22</sup> Lenny Luchetti, “Healthy Pastor, Healthy Church: When My Personal Deterioration Changed Direction, so Did Our Congregation,” *Leadership Journal* (2014): 53-55.

<sup>23</sup> Steve McMullin, “The Secularization of Sunday Real or perceived competition for churches. Review of Religious Research, 55 no. 1 (2013): 43-59. doi:<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1007/s13644-012-0089-7> 1-17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

congregational reports. He stated recent interest in examining the apparent inconsistency between long-term membership decline in many Protestant denominations and overall stability in self-reported church attendance.<sup>25</sup>

Melissa Harris-Lacewell, in “Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics,” writes about an important institutional trend among the Black faithful, that African Americans are increasingly mega-churched. While a lower proportion of African Americans are regular church attendees, those who do go to church increasingly choose nondenominational mega-churches over mainline Black denominations. The Baptists, Methodist and A.M.E. congregations at the vanguard of Black political mobilization fifty years ago are increasingly irrelevant as the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and a cadre of large, nondenominational churches have taken their place as the primary location of African American worshippers. Churches of two thousand or more members are a fast-growing segment of Black religion in America. These churches can be found in traditional migration cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, and in Californian enclaves like Oakland, but mostly concentrated in Southern Sun Belt cities like Atlanta and Dallas. Black mega-churches usually are located in or near large African American suburban communities. These churches are increasingly attracting journalistic and scholarly attention and criticism as observers’ question, “whether black megachurches have effectively maintained the African American church’s traditional commitment to an active engagement with broad black-community issues.” Alternatively, the rise of the mega-church may

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<sup>25</sup> John P. Marcum, "Measuring Church Attendance: A Further Look," *Review of Religious Research* 41, no. 1 (1999): 122-30. doi:10.2307/3512431.



mean that Black Americans can be more efficiently mobilized toward political action because their church homes provide expansive networks and substantial resources.<sup>26</sup>

Karl Vaters observes that it is critical for churches to actively reach out to their communities. He explains that churches need to serve others to be healthy. Some of the things Vaters did for his community include cleaning houses for shut-ins, supplying food to the homeless, building friendships at the state mental hospital, and providing comfort at the senior center. His article also touches on the fellowship that serving others causes, asserting that when churches both serve others and fellowship with one another, they are improving the health of their church. While church health can seem nebulous and difficult to pin down, it is evident that trying to center church health on the pastor's health ignores biblical descriptions of what a church is supposed to be.<sup>27</sup>

A pastor's spiritual health certainly plays a role in determining the health of the church, and it is worthwhile for all pastors to seek moments of reflection and self-improvement to strengthen their relationship with God and their congregation; nevertheless, a church is more than its pastor. Church leaders must acknowledge that they are not an embodiment of the church, but a part of the larger community. As 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 states, "For just as the body is one and have many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." A leader is an essential member of the community, but a leader is not expected to take that position single-handedly. The church must

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<sup>26</sup> Melissa Harris-Lacewell, "Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics," *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (Summer, 2007): 180, 196, 308. [liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/214969323?accountid=12085](https://liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/214969323?accountid=12085).

<sup>27</sup> Karl Vaters, "Toss the Old Sweater: Ministry, Like a Closet, Can Be Too Full," *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2015), 62.

be instrumental as it abides with their leaders. Acts 2:42-47 portrays the church as the center of community life.

Mark Chaves in "Religious Trends in America: Social Work and Christianity," states the percentage of people who say that they have a great deal of confidence in organized religion has declined from about 35 percent in the 1970s to about 25 percent today. This decline in confidence is not unique to religious organizations. Americans are less confident in the leaders of many kinds of institutions than they were in the 1970s. Still, confidence in religious leaders has declined faster than confidence in the leaders of other institutions. Between 1973 and 1983, 35 percent of people, on average, expressed a great deal of confidence in the leaders of religious organizations, compared with only 29 percent, on average, expressing a great deal of confidence across all the other institutions included on the survey. Between 1998 and 2008, only 25 percent expressed a great deal of confidence in religious organizations—the same percentage expressing a great deal of confidence, on average, in the other kinds of institutions. In the 1970s, religious leaders inspired somewhat greater public confidence than did leaders of other institutions, but their relative position has since declined. People now express as low a degree of confidence in religious leaders as they do, on average, in leaders of other major institutions.<sup>28</sup>

R. D. Smith, author of "Urban Marginality, Religious Liminality, and the Black Poor," states in the last several decades, formal religious affiliation has been declining more noticeably within the United States as evidenced by diminished church attendance and memberships, an increasing number of church consolidations and closings, and a growing number of persons who indicate having no religious preference or affiliation. The signs of declining religious affiliation among America's urban poor have been evident since the 1960s (as the urban poor became more

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Chaves, "Religious Trends in America," *Social Work and Christianity* 38, no. 2 (Summer, 2011): 119-32. liberty.edu.

geographically concentrated, culturally isolated, and pushed to the margins of social and institutional life), but those trends proved mostly insufficient within mainstream opinion streams as reasons to shift the “American religiosity” narrative. More recently, however, national surveys have shown notable declines in religious affiliation among Americans in general and, while it is not clear whether these figures reflect the more systematic inclusion of the urban poor in their counting procedures, it is clear they capture declines among younger and more highly educated persons.<sup>29</sup>

The authors of the article on spiritual formation found in their study that Canadian Mainline churches flourished when they focused on a more conservative Protestant theology. Such an approach includes caring and welcoming attitudes of other congregants, a greater sense of community, and sermons relying heavily on biblical passages.<sup>30</sup>

These findings are not surprising as Acts 2:42-47 promotes these sorts of values when approaching how churches should function and act. David Haskell, Stephanie Burgoyne, and Kevin Flatt highlight how their interviewees valued fellowship, one of the primary things Acts 2:42-47 espouses. They also point to the value of surveys for gathering an initial sample of data that is then followed up with interviews. The method of quantitative and then qualitative research has proven invaluable in collecting the data of the study.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> R. D. Smith, "Urban Marginality, Religious Liminality, and the Black Poor," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 1-8, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/docview/1774866230?accountid=12085>.

<sup>30</sup> David M. Haskell, Stephanie Burgoyne, and Kevin N. Flatt, "Factors Influencing Church Choice: An Exploration of Responses from New Attendees at Growing Canadian Mainline Churches: Factors Influencing Church Choice," *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne De Sociologie* 53, no. 4 (2016): 409-436.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

In an article written by Burgoyne, Flatt, and Haskell, the authors note that theological conservatism of attendees, contemporary worship style, and greater emphasis on youth programming were predictors of longer commitments to church and influenced church attendance. Their research surveyed 200 church attendees and 30 clergy members. It shows that a robust church attempts to make itself a central pillar of the community built upon biblical, conservative church traditions that can turn the tide of shrinking membership within the church.<sup>32</sup>

In his dissertation, Shelton Ross found that the Baptist General Convention of Texas Related Churches experienced renewed growth by incorporating “contemporary music” as its dominant music style. Here “contemporary” should be considered the music that the congregation finds culturally relevant for worship. Thus, contemporary does not necessarily mean what is trending on the radio.<sup>33</sup> What Ross’s dissertation indicates is that shifts to contemporary worship styles do not mean removing worship from its biblical source. He reports that some churches still include a traditional worship style for unity. Unity is one of the foci of Acts 2:42-47, which reflects the need for a church to be a center that unifies its community under the teachings of the Bible. Ephesians 4:1-6 calls for unity and highlights its importance to the survival of a community:

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

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<sup>32</sup> Stephanie Burgoyne, Kevin N. Flatt, and David M. Haskell, "Going the Extra Mile: The Impact of Theological Orientation and Other Congregational Factors on the Drive Times of Growing and Declining Church Attendees," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 34, no. 3 (2017): 324-351.

<sup>33</sup> Ross D. Shelton, "Revitalization in Seven Previously Declining, Established, Baptist General Convention of Texas-Related Churches" (D. Min diss., Dallas Baptist University, 2015), 126-127.

Unifying the community is one of the biggest weapons the church has against challenges that church leaders feel they cannot overcome. Donald Hilliard Jr., in *Church Growth from an African American Perspective*, found church growth by following three simple principles for interacting with a congregation: to love one another, to lift one another, and to liberate each other. These forms speak to the importance of unity for African American churches, which typically deal with struggles in urban contexts at higher rates than suburban white churches. Hilliard works to accomplish unity by centering the church community and preaching the whole of the Bible rather than preferred passages. He also found success by embracing traditional methods of prayer and worship with a people-centered approach rather than a programmatic one.<sup>34</sup>

Acts 2:42-47 presents a model that values a church community and the people therein. If Acts 2:42-47 is taught and embodied, a pastor can count on a congregation understanding and taking on the charges of Acts. As Nehemiah 8:8 states, “So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense and helped them to understand the reading.” An understanding of the purpose of the church, of what the church can do for a community and its people, must help it to overcome any challenges the church faces from the outside. Overcoming challenges are especially crucial for inner-city churches, which find their congregations under near-constant assault.

Following the Law of God can be helpful in overcoming the challenges an inner-city church faces, and these challenges are not incompatible with Acts 2:42-47. As 2 Kings 22:8 points out, “Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan, the secretary, ‘I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.’ He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.” The book of the Law is

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<sup>34</sup> Donald Hillard Jr., *Church Growth from an African American Perspective* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 2006), 97.

the framework by which the people of God had their foundation for moral guidance and is comparable to Acts 2:42. The Christian church is not a totally separate entity, removed from the teachings of the Old Testament.

Urban blight is one of the most significant problems affecting inner-city churches. However, some Black churches have recaptured their role in the community as a center for moral and spiritual guidance. Savvy church leaders in these communities have made the church a center for combatting these social ills that their communities face. It is evident that church leaders can achieve such unity, fellowship, and leadership as embodied in Acts 2:42-47. This may be a tricky needle for inner-city church leaders to thread. As in the case of Chicago churches in African American neighborhoods, it takes a church leader's commitment to staying true to these biblical traditions in a way that keeps alive a vision of the future for the church.

In his dissertation, Norman Goodwin gave questionnaires and conducted interviews with church members and leaders in three churches that have experienced booms in growth in Chicago and three churches in the city that have shrunk in membership. Goodwin's findings saw a clear trend toward the need for senior pastors to be adaptive to change, cast a clear future vision for their church, and maintain a very strong community presence.<sup>35</sup>

These sorts of results show that Acts 2:42-47 is still compatible with casting a vision with healthy contemporary churches. Acts 2:42-47's focus on community involvement and on giving the church a clear vision for the future makes room for a pastor to lead their church through modern challenges within a biblical framework that is adaptive and centered on developing community involvement, which is a natural facet of the church's role in the inner-city.

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<sup>35</sup> Norman Goodwin, "A Study of Why Some Inner-City, African-American Churches in Chicago Have Undergone Significant Membership Declines, While Others Have Seen Large Increases in Memberships in the Post-Civil Rights Era" (DMin thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2015), 7-12.

One of the critical roles of the church in the inner-city is backed up by Acts 4:32-37, which parallels Acts 2:42-47 by showing how important sharing material possessions was to New Testament Christians.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his or her possessions was their own, but he or she shared everything he or she had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Moreover, God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it and distributed to anyone who had a need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

In the Acts 4 passage, followers of the Apostles and Christ did not see their possession in a worldly sense. Their hearts were set on supporting its community of followers. The communities in inner-city churches can be protected from outside economic pressures when the community is committed to serving one another and trusting in God's grace to provide needs in the matter of spirit that can redress problems like drugs, alcohol, and other petty material pursuits.

Michael Polley found when comparing churches, as Brunson and Caner do, in "Why Churches Die," it is easy to point to the importance of Acts 2:42-47 in keeping churches healthy. Brunson and Caner identified several primary problems as churches age: resistance to change, declining membership, change in demographics, and burdens imposed by traditions. Polly helpfully points out that many of these problems are addressed by turning to Acts 2:42-47. Polly surveyed 23 local church leaders and their attitudes within their church and found that those who followed Acts 2:42-47 and the leadership principles of Ephesians 4:11-13 were better prepared to overcome the challenges that Brunson and Caner described.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Polley, *The Critical Factors of Effective Leadership in Heritage Churches* (DMin diss. Biola University, 2014), 14.

These are problems that Kevin Graham Ford also addresses in his book. The author's biblical model called for a transformed church. The transformed church is countercultural, self-identifying, and passionately reaches out. It is characterized by the community, code, shared leadership, mission, and adaptive change. Ford writes, "In the process we often miss the thing that should be driving us: an intimate relationship with God and a life based on following Him that includes commitment to loving and serving others."<sup>37</sup> A common thread between church health (spiritual and otherwise) and multi-ethnic inner-city churches is that just because the conditions on the ground (in the community the church located) are dire does not mean a church is going to be in a dilapidated state of disrepair.

The only measure where Southern Baptists are growing is their number of churches, adding 479 churches last year for a total of more than 47,000. However, leaders are concerned that they have fewer people to fill those churches. Congregations reported an overall drop in Sunday service attendance (down 7%) and fewer new believers added through baptism (down 5%). Denominational leaders blame the downward trajectory on their struggle for effective evangelism. "It is clear that evangelism and discipleship are waning," Thom Rainer, president, and CEO of Life Way Christian Resources, an SBC affiliate which produces the ACP report, told BP. "I do not believe it is due to the lack of opportunities, in any case. Instead, there is a lack of engagement."<sup>38</sup> For years, evangelicals watched their fellow Protestants in mainline denominations undergo widespread and much-talked-about decline, while hoping their more

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<sup>37</sup> Kevin G. Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing Out the Good to Get to Great* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook publisher, 2008), 42.

<sup>38</sup> Kate Shellnutt, "Hundreds of Churches Not Enough to Satisfy Southern Baptist," *Christianity Today International*. September 2017. 18



conservative theology would sustain them. As Ed Stetzer noted a year ago, “Southern Baptists are shrinking faster than United Methodists.”<sup>39</sup>

Elder E.Q. Truss, in “The Decline of Church Attendance in Black America: A Biblical Mandate for Black Males to Godly Leadership,” states that many churchgoers have decided to stay away from a church. The article is helpful because it identifies the African-American culture as contributing scientifically to church decline, because of spiritual leadership in the home that has created a negative impact into African-American churches. Studies show for the past several decades, church attendance declined in many Baptist churches across America by 61%. The roles of black males lack the leadership ability to lead in the home, as a husband, and in the family. Because of African-American membership decline, Black Baptist churches in Florida are suffering from a lack of male leadership. Leadership must discover the problems that have caused people to withdraw from attending a church.<sup>40</sup>

### **Review of Literature: Pertinent Biblical Passages**

The following Scriptures provide the foundation for identifying and resolving the problem of decline of the multi-ethnic, inner city churches.

#### **Old Testament Texts**

Isaiah 1:4: The text is helpful because it shows that whole nations have removed themselves from God’s love and forgiveness. J. A. Motyer’s exposition of the text was useful as

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<sup>39</sup> Kate Shellnutt, “Hundreds of Churches Not Enough to Satisfy Southern Baptist,” *Christianity Today International*. September 2017. 18

<sup>40</sup>Elder E. Q. Truss, *The decline of church attendance in black America: A biblical mandate for black males to godly leadership*. DigitalCommons@Liberty University. 2018.

he provided meaningful interpretation to the “lost ideal” (Israel): sinful, iniquitous, evil-doers, and corrupt.<sup>41</sup>

Jeremiah 2:13: God’s people substituted idolatry that could not meet their spiritual needs, abandoning all hope.<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, similar offenses run rampant in the inner cities.

#### New Testament Texts

Matthew 24:4-12: R. T. France argues in *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* that the elaborate verses 4-12 are prophetic, since they foretell persecution that drives many Christians to abandon the faith. It also predicts many Christians stand a considerable chance of falling away from the faith by those who pretend to be the Christ. In summary, the church must be prepared for a period of serious decline.<sup>43</sup>

Matthew 26:26-29: According to R. T. France in *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, “The Passover ritual had its own words of explanation for the food and drink, relating to the events of the deliverance from Egypt; but now Jesus gives a new interpretation concerning a new and greater deliverance.”<sup>44</sup>

Matthew 28:19-20: Jesus’ universal Lordship now demands a universal mission. The restriction of the disciples’ mission to Israel alone in Matthew 10:5–6 can now be lifted, for the kingdom of the Son of man as described in Daniel 7:14 requires disciples of all nations. Baptizing has been mentioned in the Gospels only as the activity of John, though the Gospel of John makes it clear that it was a characteristic also of Jesus’ ministry, at least in the early days

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<sup>41</sup> J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* Vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* Vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 341–342.

<sup>44</sup> France, *Matthew*, 372–374.

while John was still active (John 3:22–26; 4:1–3). It was against the background of John’s practice that it would be understood, as an act of repentance and identification with the purified and prepared people of God; however, while John’s baptism was only a preparatory one Jesus now institutes one with a fuller meaning. It is a commitment to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (all three of whom, interestingly, were involved in the event of Jesus’ baptism, 3:16–17). Jesus thus takes his place along with his Father and the Spirit as the object of worship and the disciple’s commitment. The experience of God in these three Persons is the essential basis of discipleship. At the same time, the singular noun name (not ‘names’) underlines the unity of the three Persons<sup>45</sup> The disciples are to take over his role of teaching, “observing all that I have commanded you” (28:20). To “make disciples” is not complete unless it leads them to a life of observing Jesus’ commandments.<sup>46</sup>

Mark 14:43-53: This particular Markan text is helpful because it illustrates the pretense of false disciples of Christ who fall away when tempted by material gain, as with Judas. The downside of the betrayal was that Judas’ relationship with Christ was never restored.

John 6:60-66: The scripture is helpful because it demonstrates how the masses were quickly turned away from Christ when the teaching was challenging. In the Johannine text, Jesus espoused, “Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn. 6:53). Granted this was a difficult saying but rather than seeking an understanding, the crowds simply departed leaving the disciples to confess, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to

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<sup>45</sup> France, *Matthew*, 419–421.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

it?” (Jn. 6:60). B. M. Newman and E. A. Nida reason that the masses departed because the teaching was not in accord with the people’s expectations.<sup>47</sup>

Acts 2:5-11 is helpful because it points out the diversity of people in Jerusalem on the day the Holy Spirit came. Luke states they were devout men, from every nation (many lands or from all the nations where the Jews had dispersed); however, I. H Marshall explains that one must assume that at some point the disciples moved outside from the upper room and met the crowds assembled in Jerusalem for the feast; dwelling need not necessarily imply permanent residence, although many Jews did return to Jerusalem from the Dispersion to end their days there. They were all Jews or proselytes and not pagans.<sup>48</sup>

Acts 2:42–47: The first evangelistic message and results were impressive!<sup>49</sup> Well over 3,000 hearers accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ as preached by the Apostle Peter and were baptized. These new believers then participated in the “apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Though often considered four separate acts of worship, a strong case can be made that they are the four elements which characterized a Christian gathering in the New Testament church. This *pericope* serves as the core for the proposed biblical model.

Acts 4:13-22 encourage church leaders to preach Christ when others reject and do not see its importance. A preacher should be obedient to God under ideal and trying circumstances.

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<sup>47</sup> B. M. Newman and E. A. Nida, *A Handbook on the Gospel of John* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 212–213.

<sup>48</sup> I. H. Marshall). *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* Vol. 5, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980. 75-76.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-91.

Acts 4:32-47 demonstrate parallelism to Acts 2:42-47: Marshall states the passage shows much parallelism with the earlier summary in 2:43-47. It stresses the common mind and the generosity of the disciples in their life together. Close fellowship accompanied the preaching of the apostles. Luke was trying to emphasize that the gift of the Spirit (verse 31) led not only to inspired preaching but also to Christian fellowship and generosity.<sup>50</sup> Acts 4:32 is an excellent contribution to godly unity in the relationship of God's people. John MacArthur sees it as the richness of the fellowship and sharing experienced which signify the unity of the believers. The basis of their shared life was twofold. First, they were preoccupied with ministering to each other, so intent was they on meeting each's needs that he or she had no concern for gratifying his or her desires. There was a humility stemming from seeing themselves to Jesus Christ, and others as more important than themselves. Second, they focused beyond themselves to reaching the lost world with the truth of the gospel. That left them little time to be bothered with trivial personal matters. Their unity stemmed from focusing on those priorities Jesus had left them: selflessly loving each other and reaching the lost world.<sup>51</sup>

Acts 5:1-11: The apostolic church addressed the issue of selfishness and hypocrisy. Here, Ananias with his wife Sapphira, sold personal possessions but pretended to give it all to the church. John MacArthur in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* argues that Ananias and Sapphira saw an opportunity to gain spiritual prestige and make some money for themselves. They committed the sin of lying by publicly pretending to have given all the money, and they committed the sin of hypocrisy based on a desire for spiritual status. Peter, guided by the Holy Spirit, perceived their lies and hypocrisy. Ananias and Sapphira were guided by a satanical spirit,

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<sup>50</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 114-116.

<sup>51</sup> MacArthur, *Hebrews*, 146-47.

which filled their hearts to lie to God, the Holy Spirit and the church. God did not hesitate to permanently remove them both from the church body. The text illustrates the seriousness of sin, its judgement, how others should think about sin, God's desire for a pure church, and how sin deteriorates the body spiritually and physically.<sup>52</sup>

1 Corinthians 9:19–27: Leon Morris, in *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, said the apostle Paul did not stand on his dignity but adapted himself to the position of his hearers in a full determination to win them for Christ.<sup>53</sup> He sums it all up with “I have become all things to all men.” Morris stated that athletic contests were frequent in the Greek world, and the Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympic Games, were held every two years at Corinth. A foot race yielded but one winner. Therefore, the runners must make every effort. Winning is more than just starting in the race. The parallel with the Christian way is not complete, for many saved, not just one winner. Paul's point is that, like the runner, the Christian must give of his best.<sup>54</sup>

1 Cor. 11:26 The Lord Supper in a New Testament setting points to the time of celebrating what Christ did to redeem humankind back to God through sacrificing himself on the cross. The Apostle Paul explains, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.” The bread and the cup represent a proclamation to the world that the Christian church is no longer divided by sin but united as one family of God (1 Cor. 10:17).

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<sup>52</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 1-12* (Chicago, Moody Bible Institute, 1994), 151-156.

<sup>53</sup> L. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 137–138.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Galatians 6:7 point out the person who sows both good or bad, reaps either one or the other, depending on which is sowed (2 Cor 9:6). The practice applies both negatively and positively (8-9).

1 Timothy 1:20 illustrates how a church can suffer from the sins of a few. Both Hymenaeus and Alexander shipwrecked their faith because they were not faithful in adhering to sound doctrine. Paul considered it a defamation of God's character. The apostle commanded that Hymenaeus and Alexander be delivered to Satan, that they might learn not to blaspheme.<sup>55</sup>

1 Timothy 3:1–7: Donald Guthrie writes in *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* the first formula, here is a trustworthy saying, draws strong attention to the importance of the overseer's office. It may seem strange that such underlining of the office was necessary, but best seen as Paul's way of bringing out the dignity of the office before introducing the particular qualifications required. The formula is used four times elsewhere in the Pastorals to introduce doctrinal sayings. The more practical use here is exceptional.<sup>56</sup>

Hebrews 6:4-6: The scripture illustrates people who came to the point of knowing (enlightened) of what it means to be in a relationship with Christ but refused to enter into the relationship. Even those who were enlightened but never made a full commitment to Christ proved a negative impact on church attendance. MacArthur argues that the universal church could gain hundreds of thousands of potential Christians if those who claim to know Christ made a full commitment to the Lord.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> See also I Corinthians 5:1-13.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Guthrie. *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Vol. 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 1990) 95.

<sup>57</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago, ILL. The Moody Bible Institute, 1983), 146.

Revelation 2-3: The seven churches of Revelation located in Asia Minor were teetering on the brink of removal. Relevant to declining inner city churches, those churches deciding to disregard God's divine plan will experience not only decline, but total eradication.

### **Summary**

Inner-city church health is dependent on sound, biblical, Spirit-led leadership. The aforementioned literature review provides the groundwork for biblical leadership and will be addressed in detail in the following chapters.

The inner-city church's environment of economic turmoil, drugs, and crime exacerbate its spiritual decline, but are not the prevailing causes of it. Inner-city church leaders have been largely ineffective in declining membership due in no small measure, to a lack of understanding and application of the biblical principles found in the New Testament. It is the premise of this thesis that the application of these godly principles within the hearts and actions of inner city church leaders, will grow the Lord's church. Glenn Daman argues as much in his well-written book, *Shepherding the Small Church: A Leadership Guide for the Majority of Today's Churches*, when he concludes that declining churches need Christian leaders who have transformed their morals and behaviors into the image and likeness of God.<sup>58</sup>

Great leadership can be helpful in addressing some of the challenges the inner-city church faces, but the need is far greater than any single pastor can provide. A church is an organization that needs sound leadership (1 Tim. 3:1ff) but the biblical model reveals that the church must be Spirit-led and biblically centered, before spiritual and numerical growth occurs.

Acts 2:42-47 centers the communal nature of the church by offering the following guiding principles: The Apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and communion,

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<sup>58</sup> Glenn Daman, *Shepherding the Small Church: A Leadership Guide for the Majority of Today's Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2007), 18-19.



prayer, giving, and worship. The Apostles' teaching brings all members of the church closer to God by understanding the ways God desires for us to live in order to be loving, Christ-like members of our community. To ignore these teachings would be to ignore the warning of Romans 16:17: "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine taught; avoid them." The Apostles' teaching gives church leaders and members a key set of tenets around which to unify their church.

Fellowship draws us closer together and emphasizes the importance of community members being available and giving one to another. Those that practice Christian fellowship are not only returning to active membership but reaching the unchurched in their respective communities. As Acts 5:42 points out, "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah." Christian fellowship not only grows and sustains the church community but provides a social network to help foster a Christian environment in the inner cities.

Breaking bread and communion create a sense of closeness to the body of Christ and draw members together with the sharing of food – essential to many families struggling for their daily bread. Similar to Jesus feeding the 5,000 when He "...directed the people to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people" (Mt. 14:19). The partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine symbolized the new covenant as seen in Matthew 26:26-28. When such love is shared in the inner cities, Christians are not only partaking in the covenant but sharing the Lord's blessings to all in need, welcoming the unchurched to experience the gospel of Jesus Christ; the Bread of Life (John 6:35).

Prayer offers a way for community members to seek guidance together and commune with God and draw a closer connection to each other and God. Giving is especially vital in inner-city communities where poverty is pervasive. Scripture teaches that Christians make up a community of “one heart and soul” who understand that worldly possessions are not theirs to hoard, but given by God in order to help others (Acts 4:32-35); or in the words of Jesus, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mt. 19:21). A church community that is eager to give and share resources helps encourage the whole community and keeps more and more of its members from resorting to crime in order to survive.

Worship reminds members of their oneness in Christ, encouraging each member to be transformed into the image of Christ and reflect His love to those struggling in the darkness of sin and evil, rampant in the inner cities. Teaching church leaders the importance of congregational worship also empowers the worshippers to trust the resurrected Christ to overcome inner city evil, just as He conquered the Evil One (I Cor. 15:57-58).

When the Apostles were threatened to silence their faith under threat of imprisonment, they were indignant, and asked “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to Him? You are the judges! As for us, we cannot help but speak about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19). The biblical text is clear, in order for the inner city church to cease its decline and become the loving, relational, church that God intended, it must be grounded in the Apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts2:42).

## Chapter 2

### Declining Inner-City Churches: Survey Results and Research Process

Those who participated in the survey indisputably concluded that inner-city churches are declining. Scholarly support, applied to the state of the Christian church in general, corroborated the findings, concluding that many churches in the United States are in similar decline. Contributing factors include, but are not limited to, the pastor's pre-Christian moral failure, divisiveness among church leaders, poorly developed and administered ministries, competing churches within the same proximity, a failure to utilize cutting-edge technology, poor facilities, socio-economic changes, and poor preaching.<sup>59</sup>

Equally alarming, Sunday sports have become the center of entertainment and have replaced church attendance for many baby boomers, busters, generation X, and millennials. Other secular activities, demanding the public's attention on any given Sunday, contribute to a decline in church attendance. In a study by Steve McMullin, an associate professor at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia, Canada, both pastors and church members identified competing Sunday activities as the primary decline in Sunday worship attendance. Additionally, McMullin's study discovered that the repeal of the "blue laws," requiring all retail stores to be closed on Sundays, has paved the way for the general public to work and shop on a day, previously revered in American culture as a day of rest – the Christian sabbath. Even children's sporting events are being scheduled at a time in American communities, heretofore, was

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<sup>59</sup> Keith M. Wulff, "Are Pastors the Cause of the Loss of Church Membership?" *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 1 (09, 2011): 1-7.

designated as the time of worship.<sup>60</sup> Without a doubt, the secularization of Sundays, has contributed to the decline of worship attendance in the inner city church. The decline of the multi-ethnic, inner city church, is the result of the aforementioned and similar contributing factors, as revealed in the following survey findings.

### **Sampling Description**

The surveyed churches represent denominational and non-denominational churches with a combined worship attendance of over 3000 members. Utilizing Google Forms, the survey instruments were sent, scored, and analyzed. The applied research included both denominational and non-denominational churches with memberships of 500 or less engaged in inner-city ministries. The geographical locations were inner city communities set in general populations of at least 500,000.

### **Methodology**

Participating inner-city churches were selected based on location, size of membership, and ministry type. The most effective method for contacting church leaders was through electronic mail, which worked well due to its anonymity (attracting those participants reluctant to schedule a face-to-face interview), and ample time for the participants to consider the questions without a perceived pressure from the researcher to provide a certain response. Interviews have the potential to be controlled and manipulated by the interviewer, tainting the research. The emailed questionnaire helped avoid any undue influence.

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<sup>60</sup> Steve McMullin, "The Secularization of Sunday: Real or Perceived Competition for Churches." *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 1, (2013): 43-59.

Electronic surveys provided an extra measure of privacy, focusing on particular questions in a non-threatening medium. There was a little conversation with some participants, but no conversations recorded, and the identity of each participant remained anonymous.

### **Reason for the Survey**

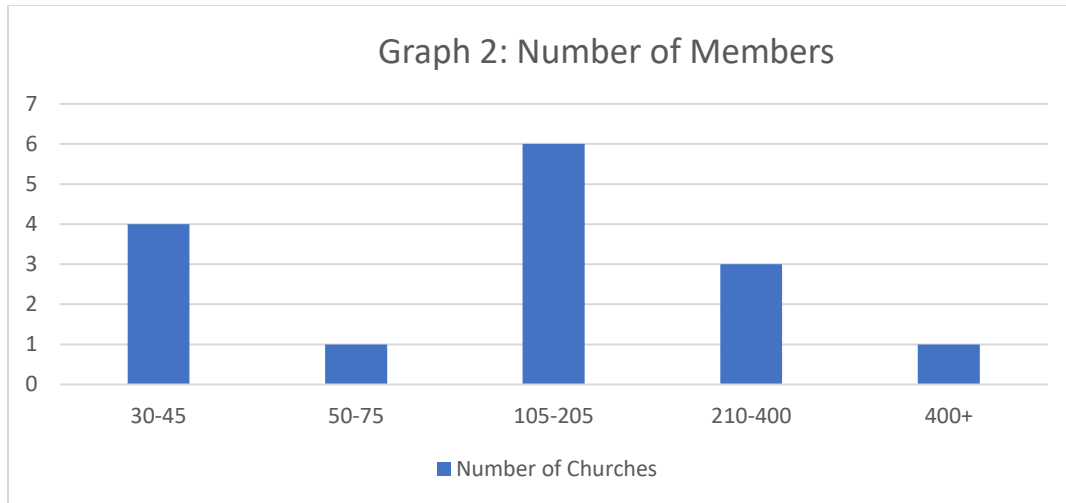
The survey assessed data from multi-ethnic, inner-city churches. The analytical study introduced data collected from other multi-ethnic, inner-city church leaders who are experiencing a loss of members in their ministry context. The findings, based on specific questions asked in the survey, were analyzed to understand how church leaders confirmed a numeric decline in their ministry context. In the following discussion, attention is given to the construction of the survey, which revealed specific points of interest, supporting the overall thesis that multi-ethnic, inner-city churches are in serious decline.

### **Survey Construction**

The applied research instruments were designed in such a way to ascertain whether or not inner city churches were in numeric decline and if so, why. The survey questions offer an opportunity for responders to prove the premise of the thesis but are not biased towards respondents proving the premise. Questions were crafted to be easily understood and answerable for respondents, and Google Forms was used to code data into graphs and other visual representations easily. Graphs are provided to illustrate the survey findings. When the findings do not lend themselves to be charted, such tables are not provided. Over ninety percent of all participants experienced declining churches.

The findings of the individual questions are in the form of raw data, and without a comparative study to the whole of the survey, do not explain why multi-ethnic, inner-city

churches are declining; however, when included as part of the whole, the conclusion is definitive.



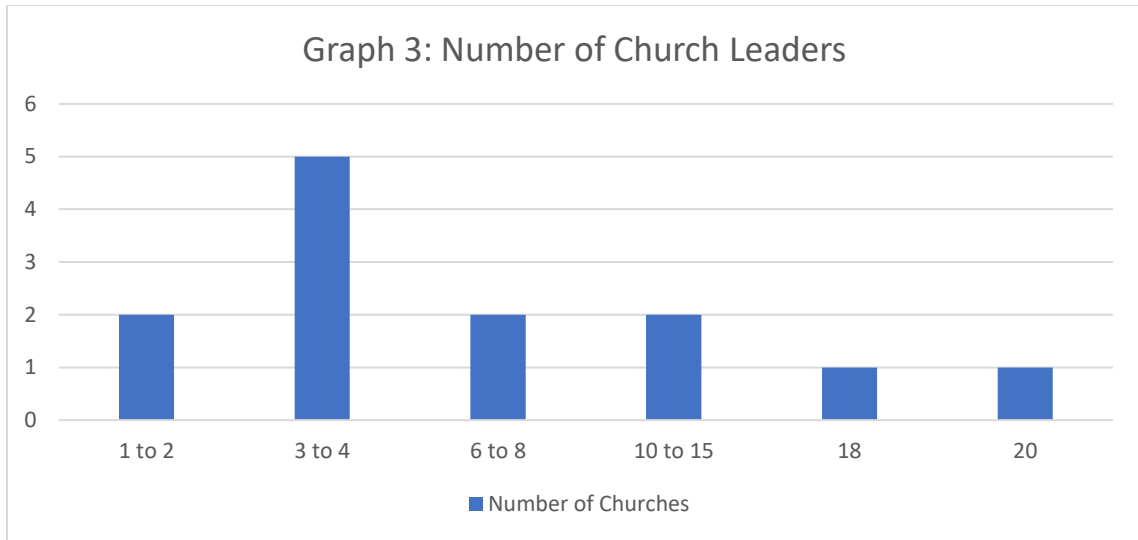
Survey Question: *“How many regular attendants does your church service have?”*<sup>61</sup>

Churches range in attendance from 30 to 400; collectively representing over 3,000 members.

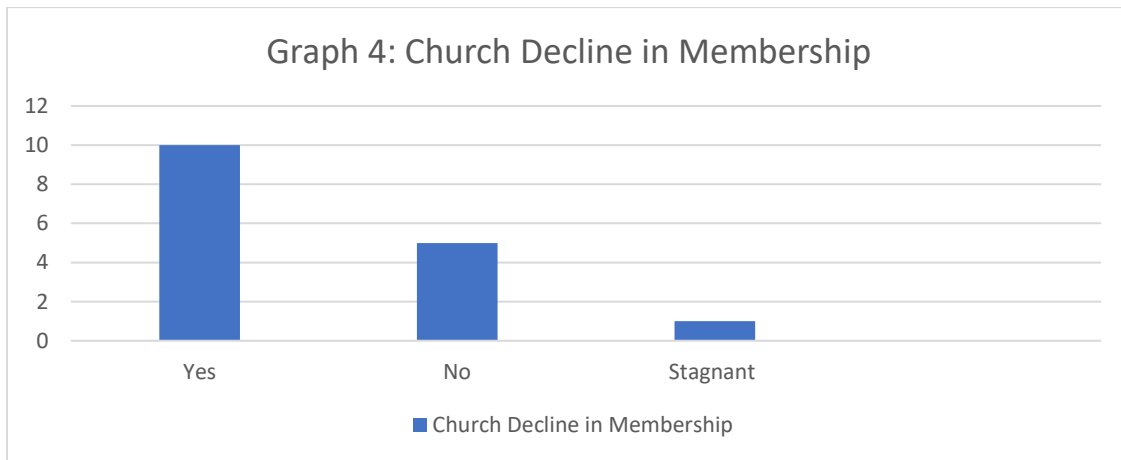
Considering the number of worshiping members, the applied research is based on a substantial sample.

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<sup>61</sup> Data from one of the churches in the survey does not apply because it does not meet the criteria of the survey.

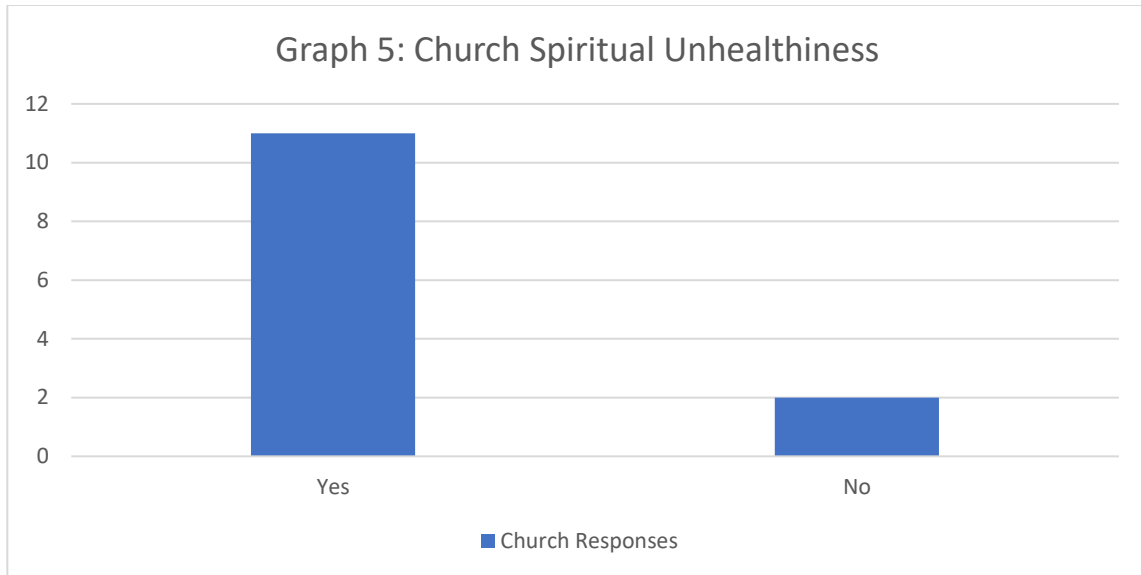


Survey Question: *“How many church leaders does your church have?”* The larger the membership, the larger the pastoral leadership team. Of the participants surveyed – pastors, elders, staff – ninety-eight responded.



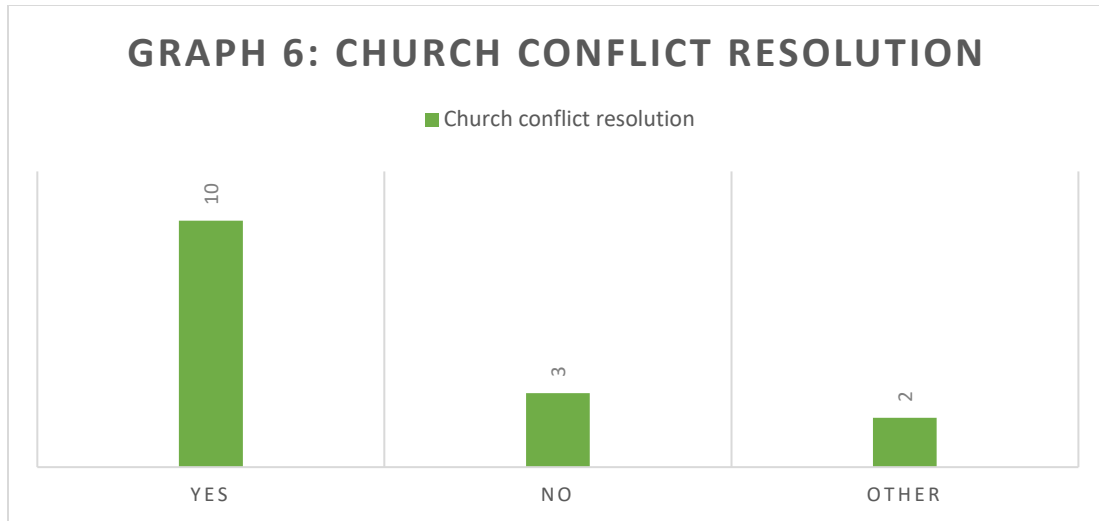
Survey Question: *“Have you detected a change in your membership size? Can you give reason(s) for the decline or growth?”* Of the pastors surveyed, 70% stated that their churches were in serious decline. Reasons for the decline were listed as death, college students choosing to

disassociate themselves from the church, complete congregational disregard for evangelistic outreach in the community reinforced by a pastoral leadership failure in evangelizing the unsaved, socio-economic changes resulting in a loss of work or job relocation, and a significant change in the age demographic – the elderly were predominant.



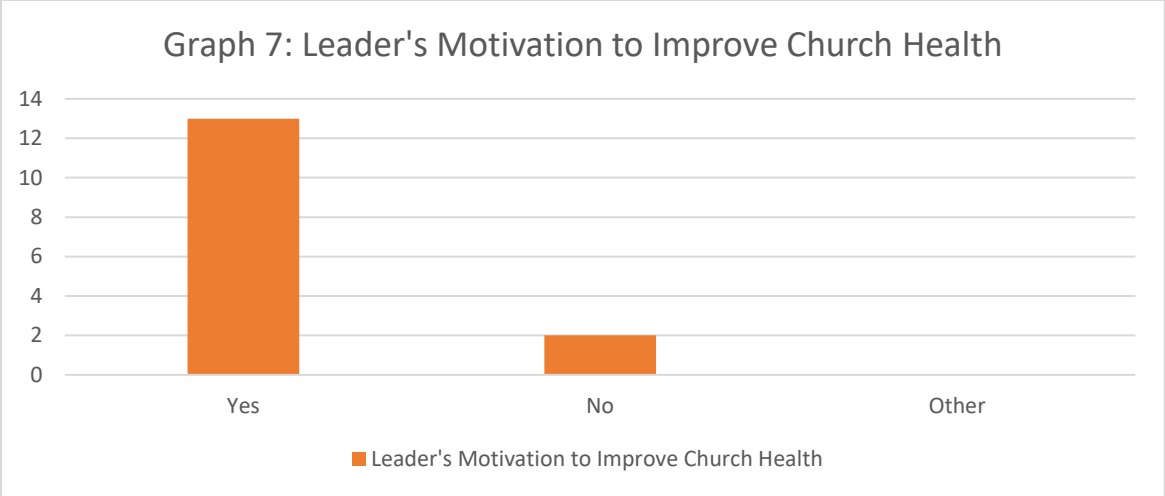
Survey Question: *“Have you, at any level, experienced any spiritual unhealthiness within your church?”* The findings revealed that of the churches surveyed, 85% of the pastoral leaders described a significant loss of membership and attributed the decline of numbers to a lack of spiritual health. Of the reasons provided by the church leaders (pastors, elders, and staff), the predominant ones were sin, sexual improprieties of church leaders, influx of multi-faiths, and the flagrant disregard in the power and usefulness of prayer.



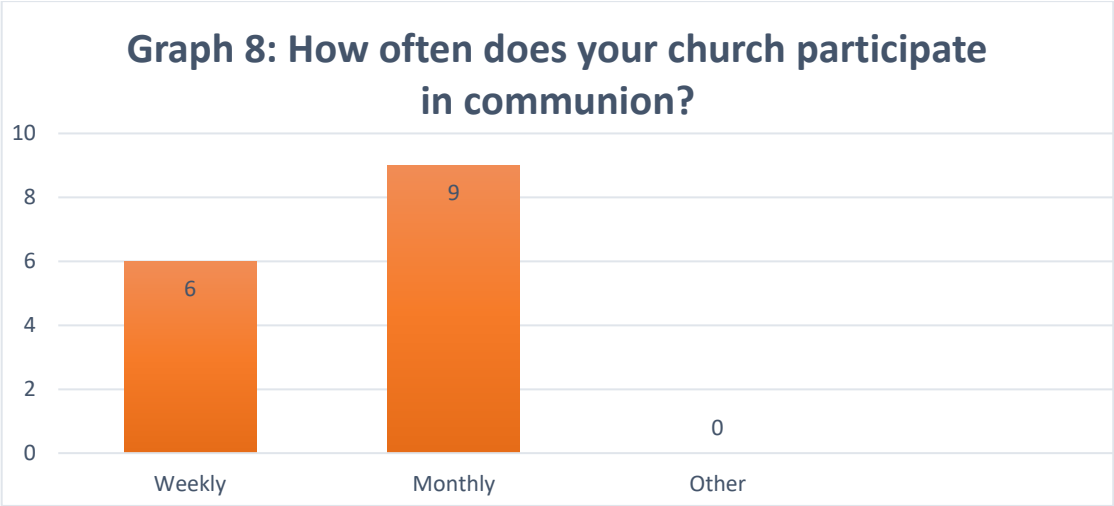


Survey Question: *“As a leader, have you ever had to resolve unhealthy environments in your church? If so, how?”* Based on the participants’ responses, 80% of the churches experienced significant church conflict. The numbers were especially alarming when factoring the 2,400 members who were affected by the lack of conflict resolution. The churches that experienced such unresolved conflict were in serious decline. Many of the issues centered on the core of the Christian message, the gospel of Jesus Christ; as one of the pastors explained,

For my church, the larger issue was a heavy emphasis on salvation, and a weak emphasis on sanctification. Additionally, there was a heavy emphasis on grace, and almost no emphasis on righteous living. The way to resolve such matters is through 1) addressing it from the pulpit, 2) starting a discipleship ministry in the church, and 3) making sure my leaders understood the problem and were actively seeking to remedy the situation in partnership with me.



Survey Question: *“Do you believe that your fellow church leaders are motivated to improve your church's health? Why or why not?”* Though eighty-seven percent of the church leaders indicated they were motivated to improve their church’s spiritual health, they reported that their memberships continued to decline; moreover, it was reported that neither the pastoral leadership or the membership of these churches seemed concerned with the regression.

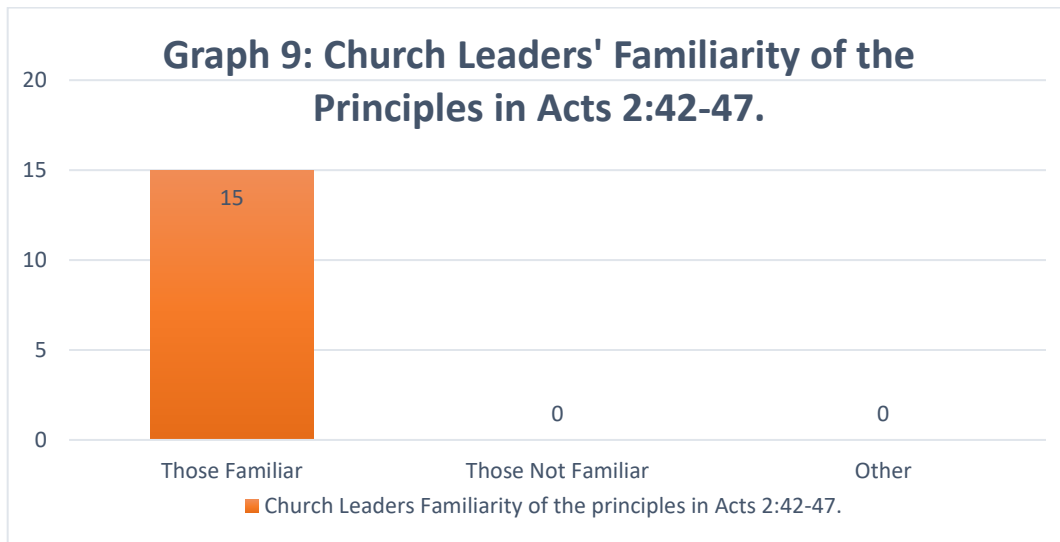


Survey Question: *“How often does your church participate in communion? Is it important to know if churches are committed to patterns for communion as seen in the early church? If so, why? If not, why?”* Representing over 3,000 worshipping Christians in 15 church communities, weekly partakers of the Lord’s Supper were in the minority. It is the premise of this paper that one solution to greater spiritual health and the building of a holy community is a biblical understanding of the “breaking of bread” as seen through the lens of the New Testament church (Acts 2:42).

Survey Question: *“How has Acts 2:42-47 applied to your ministry?”* All of the churches responded that they used portions of the Acts 2 model in their churches, but no one implemented the complete biblical model (apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers) during the plenary worship. Though every pastor considered the Bible to be foundational to their worship, the infrequent application of the early church model may say otherwise. Some of the reasons given for partial use of the biblical model were transitioning from one service type to another, encouraging congregational support of pastoral leadership, and an attempt to recreate a “Little Easter” each Sunday. Every pastoral leadership team of the fifteen churches who participated in this study, indicated some use of the Acts 2:42-47 text, but no single leadership team used the biblical text as a complete model for their faith and practice. Although the applied research proved the surveyed churches to be decreasing in numbers, no single pastoral team considered countering the decline with the Acts 2:42-47 model.

Survey Question: *“To what extent have you, as experienced leaders within your churches, preferred certain principles over others?”* Of the total number of churches totaling 3,000 in attendance, the applied research discovered that the pastoral leadership did not incorporate the “apostles’ teaching” in their faith and practice. The other biblical mandates of the

biblical model were used proportionately as well. A certain percentage of the churches favored corporate worship (breaking of bread and prayers) over biblical teaching (apostles’ teaching) and fellowship, while others tended to favor other portions of the model. The proposed biblical model of Acts 2:42-47 (see chapter 4) must be all-inclusive in order for church growth to occur; otherwise, the trend in declining memberships in inner city churches, will continue unabated.

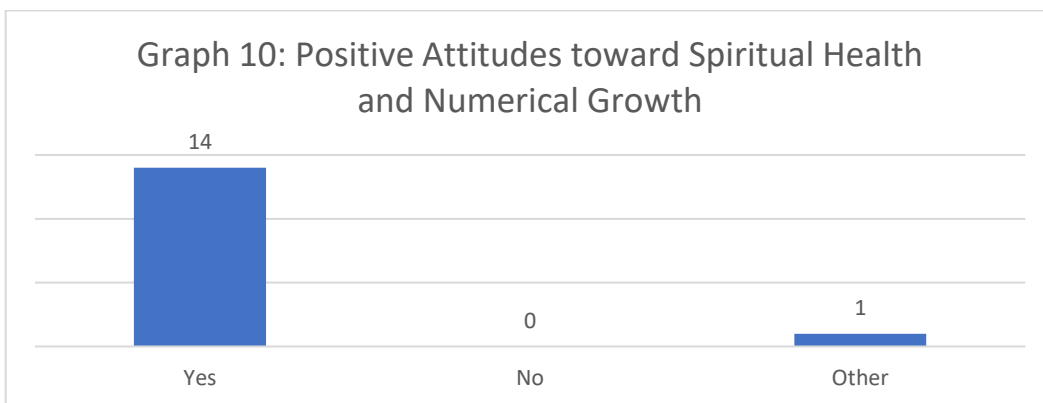


Survey Question: *“To what extent are you familiar with the principles (the apostle teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread/communion and prayers) listed above? Which ones are you most familiar with?”* The study showed participating churches were familiar with all of the principles practiced in Acts 2:42-47; however, the responses indicated (as in previous survey responses) that pastoral leaders did not implement the model as a whole but chose to use portions of it as each perceived the need of the congregation or pastoral preference regardless of need.

Survey Question: *“To what extent do you believe that the principles above add value to your ministry? How?”* Many survey participants indicated that the biblical principles found within the Jerusalem church did add value to the leader’s ministry and the spiritual health of the

church. Some shared that the biblical pattern was foundational, productive, provided guidance on how the believer should behave, Holy Spirit driven, and vital to effective ministry. Interestingly, the analysis revealed that the pastoral leadership teams understood the model in “words” only, not “action” (I John 3:18).

Survey Question: *“To what extent do you have camaraderie with your fellow church leaders? What tool may improve camaraderie with fellow church leaders?”* All church leaders responding on behalf of 3000 worshipers, reported having a close relationship with fellow leaders. Though camaraderie was high, several church leaders stressed the need for improving relationships, stating, “Leaders are not spending enough time together,” and “Non-work-related fellowship is required.” This thought was shared with many pastoral leaders who also believed that fellowship outside of regular church services, was missing. When queried as to what could improve Christian fellowship, prayer with fellow pastors was central. The research revealed an unmistakable need for shared-time in God’s Word, in general; and a concentrated study of the early church, in particular. The pastors were very open to a closer study of Acts 2:42-47 as it related to the faith, practice, and worship of their inner city churches.



Survey Question: *“To what extent does your church have positive attitudes towards spiritual health and growth? What do you believe helpful to improving positive attitudes towards spiritual health and growth if anything?”* Though a variety of reasons were given as to the spiritual state of the inner city church, most pastors believed that the church populace in general, did have positive attitudes towards spiritual health and growth, but the attitudes never translated into actions – changes in ministry or worship. In view of that generalized summary of the spiritual state of the inner city church, one participant put it succinctly, “We are not growing and haven't in years.” Another pastor replied, “Our members love the idea of spiritual health and growth but struggle to know what steps to take and how to fit new practices into their busy lives.” The two-part question was telling: both membership and leadership understand the value of spiritual health but struggle to come up with a biblical model to affect the change.

Survey Question: *“To what extent do the people in your church pray for one another when facing difficult circumstances? “Would you like to see a change in prayer concerning the matter?”* Pastoral leadership team responses were equally divided in their answers to the first question, some proudly stating the prayer life of the church was strong, while others confessing a desperate need to improve. All of the participants provided ample responses to the second question after stating, “yes.” Even those who believed their prayer ministries were strong, understood the need to continue to improve. Every pastor replied that he would like to increase the level of prayer activity and ministries within his respective church family, either in the form of selected “prayer warriors,” “prayer lines,” “prayer engagement,” or “prayer circles.”

Survey Question: *“To what extent does your church give to those in need? Do you feel giving to the needy is important”?* Every participant of the fifteen churches queried, believed giving to the needy was an important responsibility of the body of the Christ. In view of the

overwhelming agreement with the second question, one might expect the responses to the first question to be congruent; that is to say, that all of the churches considered giving a top priority. This was not the case. Of the fifteen churches, only a few indicated that giving was their one of the church's top priorities. The following two responses provide an accurate sampling of the participants:

- As an urban church our funds are limited; however, we are very concerned about reaching out to the needs of others and do it through food, clothing, furniture giveaways, child care assistance, and such things as providing funeral services for those without a church home. We feel that these things are significant in the view of the community toward the church and the opportunity to reach people for Christ.
- We have an impoverished church, but we are supported by a large megachurch in Carmel, IN. Most of our funding for the church comes from their support. However, most of our church money spent on giving to those in need, through programs that support men and women coming out of prison, youth development, and housing. We also have benevolence funding that supports our family in need from rental, utility assistance, and bus passes. We also have a food pantry that is a cooperative approach. Families serve two hours a month and earn the right to shop in our pantry for their food insecurities. They receive \$80-\$120 worth of food a month. All of our giving goes to those in need in our neighborhood.

Inner city churches who understand the joy of giving are in a conundrum. Charitable ministries need sizeable contributions to meet their objectives of providing for the indigent, but the church coffers funding such ministries, are significantly affected by the size of memberships (numbers of contributors) and the socio-economic status of the worshipers – neither of which are prevalent in the inner city churches. Though the pastoral teams see the need and value of helping the impoverished in their communities, their dwindling congregations cannot meet this desperate need.

Survey Question: *“To what extent do you see communion reflecting the health of your church?”* Once again, the responses were favorable to the thought of a particular principle, such as communion, but did not transfer to the action (weekly observance). The incongruency

(believing the practice was valuable but not implementing the practice) was seen in both the worshiper and the pastor. One leader suggested preaching on the topic to help the congregation understand its significance. Others stated,

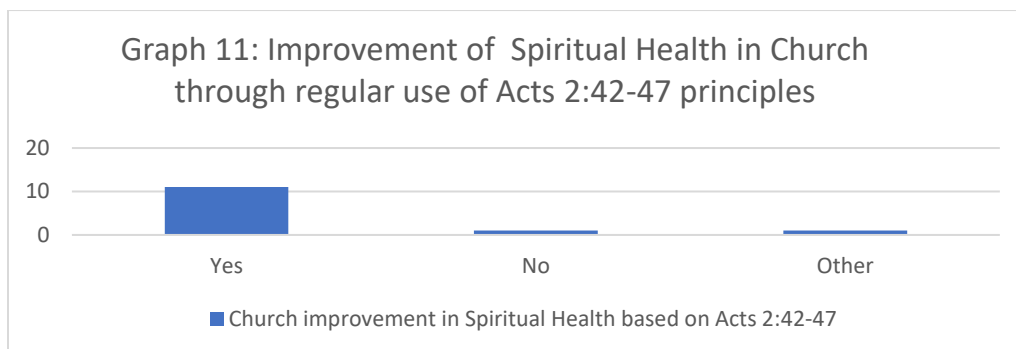
- If communion is approached and observed in the right manner, the church must understand the ultimate sacrifice and substitutionary death of Christ.
- Reflects and solidifies our belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior. It is healthy for our faith as believers.
- We are careful to make sure that our people understand the full implications of bringing a right heart to the Lord's table.
- Communion is the thermometer that gauges our spiritual health. If time is not taken to reflect what Christ did for us, we cannot see the need that others have to lead them to seek Christ.
- Being committed to the Lord's Supper helps us grow spiritually.
- The involvement and participation not only reflect the health of the church but also add to the health of the church.
- I do not see any growth as a result of us being a healthy church.

Survey Question: *“To what extent do you believe these principles should be utilized as tools to create healthy churches?”* Ninety-eight percent stated that Acts 2:42-47 principles are essential to creating healthy churches. Of the many positive responses, three are noteworthy:

- I struggle with the question because they are deeper than principles. They are a way of life. They are not tools to be used, but what should define a Christian Community. I think a great mistake in church ministry is to make everything out to be a tool or a function of the church. We are called to be Christ's church in an Acts 2 way. When we start to make its principles, then it feels like an obligation rather than out of the relationship we are doing these things. However, in being the church in an Acts 2 model the power of God seen, and that is always healthy for the church.
- The principles are the foundation of a healthy church because Jesus presented them as such.



- We believe that these are God-given principles and that God is much wiser than we are. We believe that we not only have no right to neglect or change these principles but also are unwise not to emphasize them if we desire to fulfill God's purpose in our ministry.



Survey Question: *“Can you visualize your church improving in spiritual health by using these principles regularly?”* Though 86% of the churches surveyed believed that spiritual health would result in the regular application of the Acts 2 model, the biblical model was not applied in use in its entirety by any pastoral leadership; prompting the question, “why”?

Survey Question: *“As a leader, if you see the principles as important in what ways could the principles impact the church if implemented?”* The responses varied but were positive. Some stated that “intentionality” was needed – designing worship services to incorporate the elements of Acts 2:42-47 and scheduling its practice. Others highlighted “teaching” as essential utilizing training workshops to help the congregation and pastoral staffs understand the biblical model. Still others emphasized prayer meetings. Staff participants indicated that the leadership team needed to be held accountable for implementing changes. The Acts model illustrated the apostles showed accountability and cohesion to the principles.

Survey Question: *“If your church membership is declining, what would your plan of action be to create church growth?”* Some participants indicated that they would consider the biblical model of Acts 2:42-47. Others stated prayer to be the key to address membership

decline. Others argued to strengthen the congregation but provided no recommendation to do so. Still others recommended better preaching, greater understanding of new evangelism strategies, and discipleship ministries to attract new members. Several of these recommendations are found in the proposed model of Acts 2:42-47 – prayer, congregational unity, community engagement, evangelistic outreach, discipleship.

Survey Question: “*Can you suggest models for church growth other than the model in Acts 2:42-47?*” An aggressive survey effort was sought among the 3,000 congregants and the pastoral leadership of the fifteen inner city churches to recommend a biblical model that would reverse the present trend and begin to grow their churches. Several leadership teams stated that they had implemented various models based on Scripture, such as 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:12, Ephesians 4:1-16, and 2 Timothy 2:2. The aforementioned scriptures do provide divine insight on how God’s church should love each other and one’s neighbor, but do not provide a particular model on how to implement such faith and practice. A few models for worship and ministries were external to Scripture, but these were more in line with specific methods for reaching the populace (such as telephone and social media outlets) rather than a model for church growth. Regardless of the recommended model, membership decline continued to rise.

### **Conclusion**

Fifteen multiethnic, inner city churches with declining memberships, were surveyed. Pastoral leadership teams with a cumulative total of ninety-eight church leaders, representing over 3,000 active church members, were given a series of survey questions without any undue pressure to answer in a specific way. Though the survey questions garnered hundreds of responses, there were common trends:

- Church decline is in direct proportion to the lack of spiritual health within the church body.

- Pastoral leaders believed that spiritual health was connected with the faith and practice of the church body.
- Pastoral and staff leaders were motivated to improve the spiritual health of churches but lacked a substantive model that they believed, if implemented, would resolve the problem.
- Though certain elements of the biblical model, as recorded in Acts 2:42-47 and implemented in Acts 2-7, were utilized, the pattern as a whole was never considered.
- Most of the churches believed the Acts 2:42-47 model to be important to their ministry context but lacked the wherewithal to implement it.
- Church leaders desired to see their churches improve spiritually and numerically.

With the obvious decline of many multiethnic, inner city churches, it is important to address the problem with a biblical solution. After all, Scripture is “[I]nspired by God, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, RSV).

The applied research revealed a problem with the inner city church in significant decline. These findings are corroborated in the following chapter with academic research, scholarly opinions and further research study groups. Both applied and academic research substantiate the need of a solution to church decline in America’s inner cities, which leads the reader to the proposed solution, the unmitigated application of the biblical church model of Acts 2:42-47.

## Chapter 3

### Academic Analysis Supports Survey Analysis

In the broader context of American Christianity, many scholars supported the findings of the aforementioned surveys; namely, multi-ethnic inner-city churches are losing members at an alarming rate. Though the pastoral leadership of the fifteen churches surveyed in this study were familiar with the biblical text of Acts 2:2-47, few pastoral teams applied its principles in their worship services, and those who did integrate it, did so as part of a larger model. Scholarly writings in the field of church growth and decline, reveal the need for declining churches to fully incorporate a biblical model of spiritual growth. This thesis proposes the Acts 2 model to correct the decline of the inner city churches, revealed in the applied research (surveys) and corroborated with academic research (scholarly writings).

Dwindling multi-ethnic, inner-city churches must become healthy again as Alvin Reid proposed in *Radically Unchurched*. The author argued that inner city churches often become “hospitals for sinners” and are objects within the community rather than a central piece of the community in Acts 2:42-47 fashion.<sup>62</sup>

Norman Goodwin observed that one of the keys to healing the declining churches in Chicago, is developing community (i.e. *koinonía* as in Acts 2:42). This demanded reaching into the local community with the intention of creating authentic relationships. The goal is to help the community improve its spiritual health. One of the foci of the Acts 2 model is to encourage church leaders to minister in ways that assist communities during difficulties and make

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<sup>62</sup> Alvin L. Reid, *Radically Unchurched* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2002), 20.

significant differences for Christ, emulating the Jerusalem church.<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that the first biblical church was under threat from the harsh economic conditions of its time as well as oppression from the Roman garrisons within the city; yet even in such challenging circumstances, the church enjoyed enormous growth (Acts 2:41, 4:4). A community of believers in an inner-city must be committed to providing spiritual and moral guidance to their neighbors as a means to help offset negative influences of poverty.

Inner city churches, grounded in biblical truth, will have the spiritual maturity to be a positive force for good in depressed neighborhoods where crime and poverty join to attack the spiritual health of their churches. Biblical principles in general, and the Acts 2:42-47 model in particular, provide a solid foundation for inner city Christians to combat the evil (Eph. 6:12) relentlessly attacking the Lord's church. Yet, despite the need, there is an apparent lack of spiritual commitment by most multi-ethnic, inner city churches, to utilize the principles of devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

The early church lived in community, and these principles were part and parcel to its spiritual life. The context of Acts 2 clearly records their passion for Jesus Christ, as "Day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). Such practices were foundational and set the agenda for their regular gatherings in Christ Jesus. The absence of such practices may have deprived the early church of the spiritual vigor it otherwise exhibited; more importantly, it would have abrogated God's idea of a spiritually healthy church.

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<sup>63</sup> See Norman Goodwin, "A Study of Why Some Inner-City, African-American Churches in Chicago Have Undergone Significant Membership Declines, While Others Have Seen Large Increases in Memberships in the Post-Civil Rights Era." DMin thesis, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2015. 36

The physician Luke wrote, “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teachings ...” (Acts 2:42a). Charles William Shira Jr. observes, “In Acts, the term ‘devoted’ is mentioned for the first time within the *pericope*, [and] its influence [is] felt throughout the passage.”<sup>64</sup> In “Radical Witness,” John W. Martens highlights both the disciples’ and Jesus’ passion for acting on the principles of Acts 2:42-47, emphasizing that the first followers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship.”<sup>65</sup> The “teaching” must have been the oral tradition that recounted Jesus’ instruction and the events of his passion understood in the context of the Scriptures. As the principles applied in their fullness in today’s community, they show a sense of devotion much needed in churches today.<sup>66</sup>

Geordan Hammond, in *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* describes how pioneering church leaders used traditional church practices (e.g. Acts 2:42-47) to create thriving congregations in the Georgia wilderness despite enormous challenges.<sup>67</sup> In the same way, church leaders who implement the principles of the Acts 2 model are likewise steadfast in applying God’s ideas about how Christ’s church should function. Furthermore, pastoral leaders implementing the biblical model create a flourishing environment through the work of the Holy Spirit. Conversely, leadership teams who dismiss Scripture as relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century inner city, and choose to follow their own wisdom, quench the work of the Holy Spirit and stand opposed to truth.

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<sup>64</sup> Charles William Shira Jr., "Developing a Preaching Series on the Priority of the Local Church Gathering for O'Brien Baptist Church, O'Brien, Texas" (DMin Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> John W. Martens, "Radical Witness." *America* (Apr 21, 2014), 47.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 160.

Declining churches need to reassess their model for ministry and genuinely consider a return to Scripture and an intentional study of the apostles' teaching.

### **Millennials and Seniors – Trend One**

Scholarly research corroborated the findings of the applied research (see chapter 2); specifically, declining inner city churches were ignorant of the biblical model of Acts 2. Brent H. Burdick, in his article, “The Status of the Church in North America,” identified two reasons for the loss of numbers in American churches.<sup>68</sup> One is based on the previous (faithful) generation dying and being replaced with the second generation whose biblical knowledge is suspect. Burdick described this as “generational replacement.” Second, the author explained how generational replacement created church decline. When the founding generation died, it was replaced with the millennials who were not seekers of Christianity (compare Acts 17:11). The millennials were searching for religious experiences (Wicca, eastern philosophies, etc.) but not from Christian Scripture. Since “Faith comes from hearing and hearing from the Word of God,” (Rom. 10:17), there can be no meaningful faith without the Bible. Consequently, many from the replacement generation have rejected Christianity altogether, and some have chosen to become atheists.<sup>69</sup> Though somewhat in agreement, Frank Weller in “Palatable and Profitable: Making the Sermon more useful as a Catalyst for Millennials’ Spiritual Growth” argued millennials have not altogether abandoned similarities with the previous generation, but they show noticeable differences as replacers.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Brent H. Burdick, “The Status of the Church in North America,” *Research Article* 115 no. 2 (June 17, 2018): 200-21.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Frank Weller, “Palatable and Profitable: Making the Sermon more useful as a Catalyst for Millennials’ Spiritual Growth” (DMin diss., Fuller Seminary, 2018), 77-78.

Burdick concluded that “generational replacement creating a numerical void in churches,” is but one issue contributing to church decline. The author observed that senior citizens who have dedicated their lives to Christ, were all too frequently avoiding traditional church services.<sup>71</sup> Contributing to the decline of the inner city churches are these two diverse groups – the millennials and the elderly.

In Frank Weller’s dissertation, “Palatable and Profitable: Making the Sermon more useful as a Catalyst for Millennials’ Spiritual Growth,” the author characterized the millennials as less engaged than the previous generation of the postmodern world, abandoning biblical truths, not embracing authority, consenting to a multiplicity of ideas and principles, and not seeing the benefit of creating a healthy culture.<sup>72</sup> Gallup’s chart on religious preferences estimates from 1948 to 2016 the percentage of Americans who identified as Protestant declined from 69% to 37%, a demographic that undoubtedly reflects this thesis’ premise of inner city church decline.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Brent H. Burdick, “The Status of the Church in North America,” *Review & Expositor* 115, no. 2 (June 17, 2018): 213.

<sup>72</sup> Frank Weller, “Palatable and Profitable: Making the Sermon more useful as a Catalyst for Millennials’ Spiritual Growth.” DMin diss., Fuller Seminary, 2018: 77-78.

<sup>73</sup> Linda Lyons, “Tracking U.S. Religious Preferences Over the Decades: Every mainline Protestant denomination has lost members,” Gallup Chart on Religion Preference 1948-2017, 206, accessed August 20, 2018, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0034637318771354>.



**Figure 1.**

**Table 1.** Gallup chart on religious preference 1948–2017.

Year	Protestant, %	Catholic, %	Christian (non-specific), %	Jewish, %	Mormon, %	Other specific, %	None, %	Undesignated, %
1948	69	22	–	4	–	0	2	3
1950	66	25	–	4	–	3	–	2
1955	70	22	–	4	–	2	2	1
1960	67	25	–	3	–	2	2	1
1965	69	24	–	3	–	2	2	0
1970	65	26	–	3	–	2	3	0
1975	60	27	–	2	–	4	6	1
1980	61	28	–	2	–	2	7	0
1985	57	28	–	2	2	3	8	1
1990	56	25	–	2	1	5	9	2
1995	56	27	–	2	1	5	6	2
2000	52	25	5	2	2	5	8	2
2005	49	23	7	2	2	5	10	2
2010	45	21	8	2	2	4	14	4
2011	42	23	10	2	2	5	13	3
2012	41	23	10	2	2	4	14	3
2013	38	23	10	2	2	5	15	4
2014	37	23	10	2	2	6	16	4
2015	38	23	9	2	2	6	17	4
2016	38	22	10	3	2	5	18	2
2017	38	21	9	2	2	5	20	4

What is your religious preference: Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, another religion, or no religion?

Source: Gallup.

© Statista 2017.

The Pew Research Center findings strengthen Burdick’s statistics from data collected on generational replacement and millennial rejection of the Christian faith. As the millennial generation faces the life-changing decision of following Christ, their numbers are significantly fewer than the generations they replaced. Thirty-six percent of millennials between the ages of 18 and 24 have avoided Christianity compared to 34% of older millennials, ages 25-33. The Pew Research Center’s striking parallel further reveals that six in ten millennials have no particular

Christian affiliation, compared with seven in ten among previous generations – Generation X and Baby Boomers.<sup>74</sup>

**Figure 2.**

**Generational Replacement Helping Drive Growth of Unaffiliated, Decline of Mainline Protestantism and Catholicism**

	<b>Silent generation (born 1928-1945)</b>	<b>Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)</b>	<b>Generation X (born 1965-1980)</b>	<b>Older Millennials (born 1981- 1989)</b>	<b>Younger Millennials (born 1990- 1996)</b>
	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Christian</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>56</b>
Protestant	57	52	45	38	36
<i>Evangelical</i>	30	28	25	22	19
<i>Mainline</i>	22	17	13	10	11
<i>Historically black</i>	5	7	7	6	6
Catholic	24	23	21	16	16
Other Christian groups	3	3	4	3	3
<b>Other faiths</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Don't know/refused</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100%, and nested figures may not add to subtotals indicated, due to rounding.

The "other Christian groups" category includes Mormons, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of smaller Christian groups.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

According to the Pew Research Center, mainline Protestant churches are experiencing far more decline in numerical church attendance than other Christian churches. In 2007, there was an enormous decline of 41 million Protestant adults in the United States. The decline continued unabated to 2014 with an additional 5 million (36 million Protestant adults).<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, the Pew Research Center revealed, by contrast, the historically black Protestant tradition has not

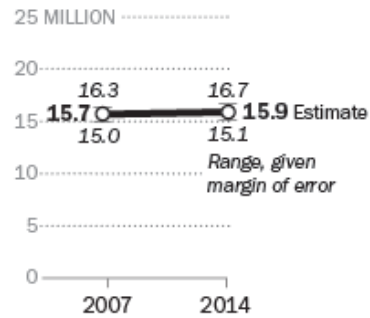
<sup>74</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, accessed August 20, 2018, [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr\\_15-05-12\\_rls-01/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr_15-05-12_rls-01/). 11.

<sup>75</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, accessed August 20, 2018, [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr\\_15-05-12\\_rls-01/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr_15-05-12_rls-01/). 8

shown any noticeable changes, remaining constant at 16 million adults. Another interesting statistic reveals that evangelical Protestants are showing a resurgence as the U.S. population grows.<sup>76</sup> With the growth of the evangelical churches in America and the historically black Protestant church remaining unchanged in membership, the decline of multi-ethnic, inner city churches is all the more disturbing, as the church culture of the inner city has been predominantly black and historically evangelical (biblically conservative).

**Figure 3.**

**Size of Historically Black Protestant Tradition Has Been Stable**



Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014  
 PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Though the research study exposes the overall decline in American Christianity, it is good to note that African-American churches and evangelical Protestant churches are growing numerically, and prayerfully, spiritually. Gary McIntosh acknowledges this good news and argues the church must understand the need to evangelize its communities, sharing the gospel of Christ through biblical models, creating numerical growth.<sup>77</sup> Churches that are urban, especially

<sup>76</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, accessed August 20, 2018, [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr\\_15-05-12\\_rls-01/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/pr_15-05-12_rls-01/). 8

<sup>77</sup> Gary McIntosh. *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003. 74.

inner-city, African American churches, when implementing the Acts principles can expect to lead people to Christ and increase in membership. They can be both challenged and encouraged by data collected from the Pew Research Center. There is a natural relationship between spiritual birth and spiritual growth. As inner city Christians experience spiritual health, they grow numerically, as did those who received the word in the apostolic era, and were baptized, adding three thousand souls to the Lord's church (Acts 2:41-41).

What a contrast to some of today's churches that are rapidly declining. The Acts 2:42-47 church, strategically located at the crossroads of three major cultures – Roman, Greek, and Jewish – was perfectly divinely positioned to spread the Word to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world (Acts 1:8); and this, while being persecuted (Acts 8:1). The same can be said of America's inner city churches.

When inner city Christians reflect the love of Christ and model their faith and practice after the Acts 2:42-47 model, the community will note the fellowship among the believers and how the body of Christ helps those living in difficult circumstances, and numeric growth follows. Acts 11:20-26 is instructive here, noting the impact of the Gentiles on the church whose beginnings were exclusively Jewish (Acts 2-7). Gary McIntosh proposes that when churches today exhibit authentic community as the early church did, more people believe and more people are added.<sup>78</sup> Karl Vaters agreed, explaining spiritual health is a great by-product of Christian service.<sup>79</sup> Vaters continued by claiming that churches with an Acts 2:42-47 attitude are servants,

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<sup>78</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 74.

<sup>79</sup> Karl Vaters, "Toss the Old Sweater: Ministry, Like a Closet, Can Be Too Full." *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2015): 62-63.

reaching out to each other, and meeting each other's needs on a daily base. His suggestions align with principles exhibited in Acts 2:42-47, inferring that when today's churches focus on the needs of others, the church grows.<sup>80</sup> The inner city church must impact its target group and in return they are impacted.

Heidi Rolland Unruh and Ronald J. Sider in their book, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry*, support the idea of sowing and reaping, by assuring church leaders numeric growth through Christian conversion is profitable, creating available servants for the kingdom.<sup>81</sup> As churches put greater emphasis on the Acts 2:42-47 model and principles, with the intention of mimicking the early church model, they attract the hurting, helpless, and hopeless. As the destitute are healed, helped, and find hope, not only are they transformed into the image of Christ, but they become spiritual forces within the local congregation. Those who before conversion to Christ needed service, become servants of Christ, and the inner city church grows experiences both numerical and spiritual growth. Rolland and Sider cites Kenny, an ex-addict, after his conversion to Christ, "God does not save us to sit in the pew – he saves us, so we can go back to where we came from and pull somebody out the same way we were."<sup>82</sup> That is precisely what the Jerusalem church experienced in Acts 2.

The church made a huge difference in both Jerusalem and its environs (Acts 5:16), surrounding communities were impacted from all walks of life. As the church spread to the pagan world (Acts 13-28), converts from pagan religions were the norm (e.g. Acts 17:34). The

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<sup>80</sup> Vaters, "Toss the Old Sweater." 9.

<sup>81</sup> Heidi Rolland Unruh and Ronald J. Sider, *Saving Souls, Serving Society: Understanding the Faith Factor in Church-Based Social Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 197.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

Acts model is desperately needed in the inner cities for the same reasons – false religions, the occult, and Christian cults.<sup>83</sup>

Applying the principles of Acts 2:42 created a sense of unexplainable joy and excitement (Acts 2:46). Such factors included strong relationships with the risen Christ, a new way of life, the occurrence of divine and supernatural events, and caring for each other's needs. When similar principles are practiced today in the inner city churches, the results are equally joyous; moreover, the congregation becomes a motivational entity encouraging neighboring churches to do the same. When godly internal influences create excitement within the inner city church, it becomes visible to others and permeates into inner-city communities around the church. Other inner city communities become part of the excitement compared to their normal lives typified by abuse, drugs, alcohol, and other vices.

Similar to Isaiah's warning to the nation of Israel who had removed itself from God's love and forgiveness (Isa. 1:4), many inner city communities have distanced themselves from the Lord and inner city church leaders are confronted by sinful, iniquitous, evil-doers, and corruption.<sup>84</sup> The early Christian church experienced the divine presence of God (Acts 2:43) and lived Spirit-led lives. Those hearing the message and seeing the results of a Spirit-led life, "repented and were baptized" and the Lord added 3,000 souls on the first day (Acts 2:41,47). As

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<sup>83</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D.200-1000* (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2012), 20.

<sup>84</sup> J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* Vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 50.

the New Testament scholar I.H. Marshall, exclaimed, “Impressive.”<sup>85</sup> Steve McMullin suggests if churches today would emulate the early church model, similar results would follow.<sup>86</sup>

### **Partial Model Lacking Devotion and Scriptural Integrity – Trend Two**

Survey analysis indicated that some inner city churches were using parts of the Acts 2 model without experiencing significant growth, but admittedly, without much devotion. It is not surprising to note that numeric and spiritual growth was absent with those congregations who haplessly applied the biblical model. The Scripture is clear, the Jerusalem church “continued steadfastly” in their devotion “to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42). The operative word is “devoted.”

The early church considered all the principles to be the centerpiece of their worship, faith, and practice. They were committed to the new teaching and way of living and lived and relied on these godly principles. As in the apostolic era, when inner city churches align themselves with the biblical model, there is a sense of progression toward spiritual health. Communities outside the body of Christ need churches that are modeling the truth as they become part of it because they are coming out of communities that are shattered by half-truths and lies. Their lives and neighborhoods have been victims of falsehood. They stand the chance of not becoming authentic Christians if they do not begin their converted lives with something drastically different from the evil experienced in their previous lives.

Pastoral leaderships of inner city churches must be cautioned against a lackluster approach when implementing the biblical model, or changing the biblical text to accommodate

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<sup>85</sup> I. H. Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* Vol. 5, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 1980. 87-91.

<sup>86</sup> Steve McMullin, " The Secularization of Sunday: Real or Perceived Competition for Churches." *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 1, (2013),” 43-59.

their own preconceived ideas. The Bible clearly states that such action will result in failure (Rev. 22:18-19).<sup>87</sup> Churches must be careful not to adjust the Bible as they minister to their people. To take away from the Scriptures by neglecting to acknowledge them in their entirety leads to a half-truth. Half-truths can be anything from utilizing part of a specific text (taking it out of its original context), to a complete abrogation of the text. To misuse a biblical text to deceive another is evil, as described in Scripture itself. The tool of deception was used by the adversary in the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:3). Church leaders must guard against *eisegesis* (reading into the biblical text) or misusing the text as Satan did on multiple occasions (Lk. 4:1-13).

The early church did not have a personal agenda, but rather God's agenda. Churches that promote God's agenda make a strong impression within their memberships and their communities. In the early church, there is no evidence of personal preference until Ananias and Sapphira, and their selfishness and lies were recognized by the Holy Spirit and ended in their deaths (Acts 5:5,10).

God's Word needs to be obeyed in its fullness and the inner city church needs to take this truth seriously. God's Word will never return to Him void when utilized properly (Isa. 55:10-11).

As the rain, and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is the Word that goes out from God's mouth. It will not return empty but accomplish what God desires and achieve the purpose for which He sent it.

Isaiah's principle is clear: churches and communities will experience transformation when church leaders allow the Word of God to flow into their ministry context. Inner city pastoral

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<sup>87</sup> Stanley M. Horton, *The Ultimate Victory: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Springfield: Logion Press, 2016), 229-230.



teams rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) will see God at work, as people are transformed from hopelessness to faith.

The Acts 2:42-47 church presents a model with principles that exhibit a people of God who were living the Word of God in a way that was accomplishing what God intended it to achieve, as Paul indicates in his Galatian epistle and shares the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Communities who were not a people of God become a people of God when church leaders share the unadulterated Word of God. God desires church leaders to honor his command that his Word is not to be tampered with but rather set as the platform for godly living (Dt. 4:2). Old Testament scholar, Doug McIntosh, emphatically wrote that the believer’s authority is God.<sup>88</sup>

Inner-city churches ministering in challenging environments within their ministry context and in unique neighborhoods have God’s assurance that when his Word goes forth the principles in Acts 2:42-47 accomplish what God intended. The biblical model demands that Spirit-led leaders preach Christ even when threatened (Acts 4:19). A preacher should be obedient to God when times are favorable and inauspicious.

By not engaging all of the principles of Acts 2:42, pastoral leaders are restructuring the text and failing to visualize the dampening of the Spirit on the inner city community. When leaders neglect to engage the Bible in its fullness, God withdraws His blessings (Rev. 22:18-19; Dt. 12:32). When church leaders apply all the teaching and principles in Acts 2:42-47, they are permitting God’s written word to go forth with the power of the Holy Spirit as a witness of Christ.

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<sup>88</sup> Doug McIntosh, *Deuteronomy* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2002), 63.

Some pastoral leadership teams also have the tendency to favor certain passages in an attempt to perpetuate their denominational tenets, neglecting the real needs of the inner city community. Neglecting to share the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) sends the wrong message to the biblically unformed; specifically, that it is perfectly alright to dismiss some scripture as unimportant. Preaching the whole truth eliminates doctrinal issues in inner-city environments where people are subject to confuse God's desired plan for humanity with a false hope.

Most of the community is trying to escape an undesirable life of severe poverty, trapped in unproductive economic settings, seeking hope in the false systems, and intentionally looking for churches who preach and promise material prosperity. It is true that a saving faith in Jesus Christ will reap an abundant life (Jn. 10:10) but the evangelist (i.e. pastoral team) must communicate “counting the cost” and the joy that comes from “taking up one’s cross” and following Jesus (Mt. 16:24-28).

Inner-city people deserve the right to know that God’s love, grace, and mercy applies to all people, but more so they must understand how to address their spiritual needs. Church leaders ministering in inner-cities must be careful not to be careless with the Word of God, creating a doctrine that engages one group but does not apply to others. James DiCenzo, writing about the renowned philosopher, Immanuel Kant, underlines the danger of favoring one group over another.

Kant’s use of the term favor is specifically intertwined with his analyses of the Christian idea of divine grace. Accordingly, the concepts of favor, favoritism, and favor-seeking are often used to characterize attitudes and ends that are antithetical to the moral law, because they express a desire to privilege oneself over others.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> James DiCenzo, "Grace and Favor in Kant's Ethical Explication of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78, no. 1 (08, 2015): 32-33.

The danger of favoring one group over another undermines the biblical doctrine of grace, God's unmerited favor extended to all those with faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Simply put, God does not show favoritism (Acts 10:34), and His church must reflect His divine love and grace. The members of the Jerusalem church serve as a positive example to those living in the inner-cities. Regardless of their country of origin, race, gender, or socio-economic status (Acts 2:9-11, 17-18, 44-45), the church welcomed and provided for all persons.

According to the analytical research, some inner city pastors dismissed the Acts 2 model in favor of a personal model developed by supporting their plan with particular proof texts – taking certain scriptures out of their biblical context in an effort to describe the model as biblical. Churches approaching the Scripture in such a way are in a sense unintentionally creating their own sacred writing (i.e. their own Bible). Though inner city neighborhoods may not experience the same level of higher education as their suburbia counterparts, they are nonetheless literate, and would be well served if given the Word of God as opposed to a particular minister's personal doctrinal tract. Church leaders would better serve their communities by not applying the same principle of Thomas Jefferson, the renowned author of the Declaration of Independence, and the nation's third president. Jefferson was devoted to the teachings of Jesus Christ but considered the authors of the four gospels to be untrustworthy; therefore, he created his own gospel by simply removing portions of the New Testament ideas of Christ and distinguishing it from what he called “the dishonesty of organizing followers.”<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, the apostle Paul saw the same deterioration of God's absolute truth entering in the church and warned the Ephesian elders to be diligent and cautious of false teachers (Acts 20:28-30). The responsibility to proclaim the whole counsel of God rests with each of the Lord's

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<sup>90</sup> R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire: Postcolonial Exploration* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9.

servants, especially those called to pastor His flock. In his letter to Titus, Paul alerts Titus to the importance of holding on to sound doctrine (1:9). The great apostle anticipated that a time would come when sound doctrine would not be tolerated by some pastors; rather, they would teach their own self-aggrandizing false doctrine, catering to their own pride (2 Tim 4:34).

Jesus spent much time confronting false teachers and religious leaders in his ministry (Matt 16:11-12; 23:1-39). Churches leaders that dismiss the Scripture in favor of their own teaching-fancies, contravene sound doctrine. David Goodhew, in *Towards a Theology of Church Growth*, offers encouraging words challenging churches to respect a person's non-Christian belief, while simultaneously advancing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Goodhew argued that at the heart of the Christian tradition is the willingness to proclaim Christ as Lord, encouraging others to follow.<sup>91</sup>

Churches that are growing disciples for Christ, are providing sound doctrine within the ministry context. This is especially important in the inner city where the majority of residents are frequently exposed to cultic religions. The early church created unity and a loving environment, but spoke the truth in love by addressing sin, and judgment (Acts 5:1-11).

### **Signs of a Healthy Church – Trend Three**

Authentic pastoral leaders strongly desire for their congregations to grow spiritually and numerically, but often differ on what a healthy church looks like; therefore, it is incumbent of all leaders to identify the biblical markers of a growing church. The Bible is replete with what constitutes a healthy church – centrality of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23), an appreciation of partnership with each other and God (I Jn. 1:1-4), a recognition that the redeemed have been delivered from spiritual bondage as reenacted in the Lord's Supper (Mt. 26:26-29), and the power of prayer (Mt.

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<sup>91</sup>David Goodhew, *Towards a Theology of Church Growth* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

21:22). In other words, a healthy church is devoted to the apostles' teachings (Word of God), fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (Acts 2:42). When one falls out of favor with the Lord, it can always be traced to sin.

The same is true for a church family, as revealed in a study of the seven churches of Asia Minor as depicted by John in Revelation 2-3. Even a cursory study of the *pericope* (Rev. 2:1-3:22) reveals the sins of the churches (with the exceptions of Smyrna and Philadelphia) as contravening the Jerusalem model. Ephesus had forsaken its first love (2:4), Pergamum welcomed false teachers (2:16), Thyatira held to the teachings of a false prophetess (2:20), Sardis practiced evil while pretending to be righteous (3:1b), and Laodicea was lukewarm and insipid to God (3:16).

Equating congregational health with allegiance to Christ and His Word is undisputed, though scholars may differ on the role pastoral leaders play with regards to church growth. In an article published by *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, author Rodney Mills proposed the theory of Natural Church Development (NCD), wherein he claimed that good pastoral leadership is not essential for church growth. Alluding to the parable of "The Seed Growing of Itself" in Mark 4:26-29, Mills argues that God will provide the growth regardless of pastoral guidance.<sup>92</sup> It is true that one Christian may plant, and another water, and "God gives the growth" (I Cor. 3:6), but God's plan clearly calls for the involvement of church leaders (Mt. 28:19-20). As such, successful church leaders create an environment whereby God can bring about His harvest and grow His kingdom.

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<sup>92</sup> Rodney Mills, "Healthy Churches Grow," *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 10, no. 2 (2016): 68-76.

In opposition to Mills, John MacArthur reasons that spiritually healthy churches are led by spiritually healthy leadership.<sup>93</sup> Included in the definition of “healthy” is providing a Christ-like witness to the pastor’s community. Central to this thesis, pastoral leaders in the inner cities must “walk the walk” and live lives worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1). In the inner cities people are often spiritually bankrupt, in desperate need of a godly model. Both female and male church leaders must maintain and exhibit high spiritual standards and godly outer appearances (1 Tim. 2:8-10 is instructive here). This biblical truth applies everywhere, but in the inner city, where violence among men and provocative dress with females is rampant, it has special significance.

The oft repeated proverb, “Iron sharpens iron” (Prov. 27:17) is applicable to our multiethnic, inner city pastoral leaders in this regard. Leaders must encourage leaders to live responsible lives and reflect the image of Christ (in spirit and flesh) to those souls entrusted to them by the Lord (1 Cor. 9:27). Christians in leadership must be cognizant of their witness for Christ, ensuring a moral lifestyle congruent to their calling. Living a lifestyle “above reproach” is fundamental to a pastor’s calling (1 Tim. 3:2). This is important for all Christian pastors, but for one pastoring an inner city church – replete with gang activity, murder, rampant prostitution, wife and child abuse, drugs, and other evils – the admonition to be “above reproach” is indispensable to the church’s spiritual health.

To live “above reproach” begins in the heart of the leader. In an interesting article by Bill Wilson, the author noted that healthy church leaders appreciate the need, “As God’s chosen ones [to put on] compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience ...” (Col. 3:12).<sup>94</sup> Wilson

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<sup>93</sup> John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Timothy* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1995), 101-31.

<sup>94</sup> Bill Wilson, “What does a healthy church look like?” *Review & Expositor* 113, no. 3. (2016): 333-40.

explained that pastoral leaders often get out of bed clothed in harshness, selfishness, narcissism, and short tempers. For this reason, it is advisable to “admonish one another in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16) and seek a clearer understanding of Paul’s admonition.<sup>95</sup>

Spiritually healthy communities are not only a New Testament concept. From the time of the Exodus, God desired for his people to live in a unique community, bound by fellowship and love of God and neighbor (Dt. 6:4-9; Lev. 19:18). To that end, the Lord provided moral laws in the form of ten commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). Though abused and misinterpreted by the scribes and Jewish leaders (Mt. 23:1), God’s desire for His people to live pure lives has never waned. The Apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian church, “But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints” (Eph. 5:3). In the letter to Philippi, the great apostle called for Christians to conduct themselves in the presence of unbelievers with godly conduct and character (Php. 2:14-16). When Christians live with such purpose, they demonstrate Paul’s admonition to present oneself as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1).

There is no doubt that church growth is partially contingent on how the pastoral leadership team conducts itself within the community, but how that growth is defined varies greatly. Thom S. Rainer, in *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles*, stated that because the words “church growth” are so common, confusion abounds about their precise meaning. When the North American Society for Church Growth wrote its constitution, it included a lengthy definition of church growth:

Church growth is that discipline which investigates the nature, expansion, planting, multiplication, function, and health of Christian churches as they relate to the effective implementation of God’s commission to “make disciples of people” (Matt. 28:18-20). Student of church growth strive to integrate the eternal

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<sup>95</sup> Wilson, “What does a healthy church look like?” 333-40.

theological principles of God's Word concerning the expansion of the church with the best insight of contemporary social and behavioral sciences.<sup>96</sup>

Rainer pulled some basic tenets from the above definition of church growth: church growth is a discipline, church growth is interested in disciple-making, church growth is grounded in Scripture, church growth integrates social and behavioral science, and church growth is a modern day movement.<sup>97</sup> It is true that Scripture does not provide a concise definition of church growth, relying more on the reader to glean its meaning from the biblical text; still many scholars agreed on certain principles, succinctly explained by Gary L. McIntosh, in *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build A Faithful Church*. McIntosh presents a model for building churches complete with nine principles.<sup>98</sup>

- The right premise (God's Word)
- The right priority (glorifying God)
- The right process (discipleship)
- The right power (the Holy Spirit)
- The right pastor (a faithful shepherd)
- The right people (active ministers)
- The right philosophy (cultural relevance)
- The right plan (target focused)
- The right procedure (simple structure).

McIntosh defined church growth as a discipline that seeks to understand, through biblical, sociological and behavioral study, why churches grow or decline, concluding that true church growth takes place when the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 occurs.<sup>99</sup>

Rick Warren agreed, but emphasized the role of God by exclaiming,

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<sup>96</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1998), 16.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> Gary L. McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build A Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 34.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



A lot of books and conferences on church growth fall into the “How to Build a Wave” category. They try to manufacture the wave of God’s Spirit using gimmicks, programs, or marketing techniques to create growth. However, humankind cannot produce growth! Only God makes the church grow. Only God can breathe new life into a valley of dry bones. Only God can create waves – waves of revival, waves of growth, and waves of spiritual receptivity.<sup>100</sup>

Warren is clear that church growth is in the hands of God but would undoubtedly agree with McIntosh who added that church leaders need to work with God to build faithful churches.<sup>101</sup>

Warren states that God can partner with churches especially when they are intentional, or purpose driven to produce church.<sup>102</sup> The author’s church growth principles are as follows:

Encourage the assimilation of new members on purpose,  
Program around purpose,  
Educate people on purpose,  
Start small groups on purpose,  
Add staff on purpose,  
Add structure on purpose,  
Preach on purpose,  
Budget on purpose,  
Calendar on purpose,  
Evaluate on purpose.<sup>103</sup>

The writings of Rainer, McIntosh, Warren, and others affirm that there is no single definition of church growth but there is universal acceptance of the simple farming analogy provided by the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church, pastoral leaders plant and water, but God gives the growth (I Cor. 3:6). It is the proposed thesis of this project that just such a model is provided in Acts 2 when the church of God was established on the day of Pentecost. That the inner city churches desperately need to implement this biblical model, was supported by both

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<sup>100</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 14.

<sup>101</sup> McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth*, 34.

<sup>102</sup> Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, 14.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-52.

analytical and scholarly research. The premise that the multiethnic, inner city churches in America's major cities are in decline is obvious, the only thing lacking is the remedy – the Acts 2 model.

## Chapter 4

### The Solution – The Acts 2:42-47 Model

Multi-ethnic, inner city churches are dwindling in membership. This premise is established through surveys of inner-city church leaders and rigorous scholarly studies from books, theses, dissertations, and peer-reviewed journal articles that examined common church problems in multi-ethnic, inner-city churches. Supported by applied research and scholarship, the thesis of this project is accurate – failing inner city churches would do well to consider and implement the biblical model based on Acts 2:42-47.

Inner city church leaders and pastors are looking for methods to improve numeric and spiritual growth. Proposed here is a six-week teaching seminar for church leaders and pastors, based on the Acts 2 model. Designed to encourage serious engagement with the Acts 2 model, the seminar recommends six three-hour sessions following a general format of Bible study and small group discussion.

### Part One – The Model

#### Week One -- Introduction to the Study Guide

#### A. Assess the Issue of Declining Multi-Ethnic, Inner City Churches

When problems arise, godly leaders assess the situation and seek guidance from God's Word to determine the solution. For example, when the Hellenist widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food by the Jerusalem church, the apostles addressed the issue and immediately resolved it when they,

[S]ummoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we

may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word [two critical parts of the Acts 2:42 model].”<sup>104</sup>

Problems must be resolved by those men and women ordained by God to lead His church. The first step to resolving any church issue is to identify the problem and seek guidance from the Bible for resolution.

Some inner city pastors and church leaders partake in the joy of healthy, thriving churches, but most experience personal distress, anxiety, and pressure while pastoring a dying or near-death church that is struggling to keep its doors open. Conscientious pastoral leadership teams desire to grow and are searching for an answer within Scripture; a biblical template to implement that will resolve the problem. Acts 2 provides just such a model. A thorough study of the biblical context of the Jerusalem church reveals similar demographics to America’s inner cities (multiracial, multilingual, and disparity within their socio-economic culture). Led by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:1-4), God’s template for the early church is as relevant today as it was in the first century. Acts 2 provides an ideal model for church leaders within inner-city contexts, and provides pastors and leaders with a biblical construct to prevent decline in church membership by bringing hope to those in despair and improving spiritual health.

Grounded in Scripture and practiced by the early church, the Acts 2 model counterbalances the failings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century inner city church – decline of members, lack of spiritual vitality, and a deficiency of evangelism. Not only is the model embedded in the inerrant Word of God, but its import is corroborated by a few successful inner city churches; simply put, it worked in the early church and it will work today.

Throughout this project, the premise of inner city church decline due to an inefficient church growth model, was initially substantiated by applied research – the use of survey

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<sup>104</sup> Acts 6:2-4, RSV.

instruments distributed to key multiethnic, inner city pastoral teams. The findings were unambiguous; inner city churches are failing at an alarming rate, and all too frequently due to a lack of implementing the biblical model. The applied research was validated by present scholarship in the field of church growth. Though primarily concentrated on church growth in general, the vast majority of literary evidence (by extension) supported the premise of inner city church decline. The scholarly literature directly focused on the inner city, though limited in volume, also validated the issue of decline.

### **B. Provide a Brief History of the Jerusalem Church – Acts 1-2<sup>105</sup>**

Christ established His church in Jerusalem on the day called Pentecost, a Jewish holy day of celebration, 50 days following the Passover. It was the perfect time and venue to introduce God's redemptive plan to the world because during the Passover season, the world came to Jerusalem and the ancient city was transformed from a small Hebrew town of 25,000 to a multiethnic, multilingual, Hellenistic city of at least 75,000. It was the perfect venue to initiate God's plan of redemption as Jerusalem was the geographic center of Judaism and the place where Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected, the gospel incarnate (I Cor. 15:1-4). Here the apostles waited as Jesus commanded (Lk. 24:49), until the Pentecost experience brought a compelling dynamic.

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven He gathered the eleven apostles and told them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit had come upon them and that they would be His witnesses first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and then to the uttermost parts of the

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<sup>105</sup> It is highly recommended that the seminar leader read this thesis and spend ample time studying the biblical text before leading the seminar. If one has a functional knowledge of the Greek New Testament, a word study of each element of the template (teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer) is advisable; moreover, a contextual study of chapters 1-7 using scholarly commentaries is needed to ensure a familiarity with the central text and the seminar's key passage.

world (Acts 1:8). After the Holy Spirit selected Matthias as the 12<sup>th</sup> apostle (taking the place of Judas Iscariot), the apostles found themselves in the upper room of a nameless friend in Jerusalem. Acts 2:1-4 records:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

The time had come for the gospel to be preached, and what a notable beginning. Luke informs us that “devout men from every nation under heaven” were present (Acts 2:5). All of the apostles began to preach Christ to this international community. Though these were all Jews by religion, they were culturally, ethnically, and linguistically, very different. By the power of the Holy Spirit, each person heard the saving message in his own language (Acts 2:8). Eventually, Peter stood up and began preaching Jesus Christ. At the close of Peter’s sermon, the great apostle laid the crucifixion at the very feet of his audience and said: “Let all of the house of Israel know that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you have crucified” (Acts 2:36).

When they heard this, they were cut to the heart and they asked Peter and the rest of the brothers: “What shall we do?” and Peter replied: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Luke went on to record, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). The church quickly grew from 3,000 to 5,000 and that number included only the men (Acts 4:4); including the women and children the number could have easily exceeded 10,000.

These early Jewish-Christians, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). On the foundation of teaching,

fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer, the Jerusalem church thrived. Though there were serious issues between the high council (i.e. Sanhedrin) and the apostles, specifically Peter and John (Acts 4:1-3); the church “had favor with all the people” (Acts 2:47) and was left alone to worship the Lord and spread the good news about Jesus. That is, until the disciple Stephen addressed the Sanhedrin. In a pivotal moment for the early church, Stephen infuriated the high council with the truth of God’s Word. When they heard this, the Jewish leaders were enraged and ordered Stephen to be dragged out of the city and stoned to death (Acts 7:54-59). Fear gripped the Jerusalem church and they scattered as far as Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:19).

Jerusalem was exclusively Jewish. Antioch was anything but Jewish; a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, cosmopolitan, pagan city. Once the Antioch church began to grow, the Holy Spirit set apart Paul and Barnabas to take the good news from Syria to Asia Minor and soon the whole of the Roman empire (Acts 13-28). Though the demographics significantly changed from Jerusalem to Antioch, the template for church growth remained constant – devotion to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. Each congregation retained its cultural identity (e.g. Acts 15), but the Bible is clear that the gospel remained unchanged, as did the Acts 2 template for church growth.

The present research has revealed certain denominational biases within the pastoral leadership of many inner city churches. This not only dilutes the gospel message but prevents the community from engaging in biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer; essential elements to the Christian’s faith and practice. If we cannot separate our cultural traditions from the simple message of redemption (as did the early church), then our allegiance to Christ will be divided and our mission will fail.

### C. Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Why is a biblical model for church growth needed for our inner city congregation?
  - Declining numeric membership
  - Declining spiritual vitality
  - Experience the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) which comes through spiritual growth
  - Responsibility to witness to the lost
  - Responsibility to address the social ills of our community with the love of Christ
2. What makes the Acts 2:42 model the best template for inner city church growth?
  - Perfectly Designed by God
    - Initiated by the Holy Spirit
    - Implemented by the Apostles
  - Easy to Implement
    - Provides a simple 4-element template adaptable to all humanity
    - Eliminates personal and cultural bias.
    - Works in all congregations, denominations, ethnic groups, and geographical locations.
  - Glorifies Jesus Christ as the Son of God
    - Preaches the good news of Jesus Christ
    - Only investment in the Acts 2 model is faith and application
3. Did persecution of the Christians weaken or strengthen the Jerusalem church? Explain.
  - Peter and John arrested (Acts 4:1-12, 31; 5:12-16)
  - Church scattered (Acts 8:1) but noticed the church's exponential growth (Acts 13-28)
4. Discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in the Jerusalem church (Acts 1-7)
5. What was everyday life like in the early church according to Acts 2:42a? Discuss the similarities of the Jerusalem church and the inner city communities.
6. Do you agree that an authentic church is a church whose priorities are biblical? If so, do your churches find Acts 2:42 practices relevant? Discuss how?
7. Have you ever been part of a dying church? If so, what methodology outside of Acts 2 was used to strengthen it?
8. What advice would you share as to why Acts 2:42 would be a good model to practice?
9. What interests you the most about the Acts 2 model as opposed to other church growth models?



## Week Two – First Element of Spiritual Growth: The Apostles’ Teaching

### A. Provide a Brief Biblical Study

After the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), the delivery of the first gospel sermon by the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:14-36), and the subsequent repentance and baptism of 3,000 believers (Acts 2:38-41), the early church began to meet in homes throughout Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 12:12) where they continued steadfastly to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

The use of the active verb, *proskartereō* (continued steadfastly), is operative in that it describes the intensity of their worship.<sup>106</sup> Luke highlights in Acts 2:42 that the early church “devoted themselves” to these four practices in their new life together. The early church was steadfast (not given to fluctuation or moving off course) from the apostles’ teaching. These newly converted Jewish-Christians were content with the teaching (*didachē*) of the Apostles. It was the message of Christ and about Christ, and would have included such subjects as his resurrection, the Hebrew Scripture, the Christian witness, and their own recollections of Jesus’ earthly ministry and teachings. The apostolic doctrine was the good news of Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and more. They repeated what Christ passed on to them, and their instructions are passed on to modern day churches by church leaders, pastors, and others. The apostles’ teaching focused on Christ’s instructions and was proclaimed throughout the early

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<sup>106</sup> *Proskartereō*: to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of despite difficulty—‘to devote oneself to, to keep on, to persist in.’ See J. P. Louw & E.A. Nida (1996), Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, New York: United Bible Societies), 662.

churches. Today's pastors would do well to teach and preach the same doctrine, creating spiritually healthy and growing multiethnic, inner city churches.

### **B. Apostles' Teaching in The Inner-city Setting**

Pastors and leaders in inner city ministries seeking spiritually healthy and growing churches need to be devoted to the apostolic teaching. Though the early church experienced frequent persecution (Acts 4:1-4), hunger (Acts 6:1), and homelessness (Acts 5:32-37), they provided for each other and remained steadfast to the Lord. In spite of their oppressive circumstances, they were true to the Christ's teaching. Pastoral leadership teams in the inner city will experience spiritual health and numerical growth in their ministry, providing they instill a genuine devotion to the Bible within the hearts and minds of their congregants.

### **C. Suggestions for Pastors and Church Leaders**

1. Prioritize the apostles' teaching (and all of Scripture) over extra-biblical materials and models. It is good to support the Bible with additional materials written by Christian scholars, but only as secondary sources. It is important to avoid the temptation of your congregation to elevate the writings of finite authors to a level reserved only for an infinite God.
2. Take the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 to heart; experience evangelism in your inner city neighborhoods, especially those in the proximity of your church. Jesus provided the model for evangelistic outreach in Acts 1:8 when He told the apostles, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem [first] and in all Judea and Samaria [surrounding region second] and to the end of the earth [third]." Evangelism begins in the congregation's backyard.

3. Ministers and pastors leading inner city churches must commit to teaching the unadulterated Word of God even when facing resistance. Even when threatened, pastoral leaders must stand firm on the apostles' teaching. The aforementioned applied research (surveys) substantiated the truth that those who live in America's inner cities look to the church as a refuge and sanctuary from evil.
4. Be a visionary and consider creating a strategic plan that will have at its core, the apostles' teaching.<sup>107</sup> Leaders and pastors of inner-city churches experience far more success when they envision their neighborhoods, marketplaces, crisis centers, drug treatment centers, and church settings as an environment to teach Christ.
5. Organize neighborhoods for specific events. Pastors and leaders in the inner-city context can engage the neighborhood through Alcohol Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Heroin Anonymous (HA), Gamblers Anonymous (GA), and other helpful programs. Pastors should provide their church buildings not only as meeting places for these reputable programs but encourage their congregations to utilize them, if needed. There may be someone within the pastoral leadership team or general membership who is a recovered addict, or one who once lived on the edge of life and through the grace of God, is now recovered. These Christians prove to be incredible witnesses for Christ and can touch the hearts of the inner city populace as no other.
6. Bring structure and clarity to the membership. Pastors and leaders in inner-city ministry must use the pulpit to encourage their parishioners to read and study the Bible; thereby, understanding and applying the depth of the apostles' teachings.

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<sup>107</sup> A great resource for building a strategic plan is Aubrey Malphurs' *Advanced Strategic Planning – A 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013).

7. Conduct regular Bible studies encouraging the spiritual value of the practices in the early church's teaching. If the church has a small group ministry, plan a one-year curriculum of Bible studies that would have at its core, the apostles' teaching. If there is no small group ministry, consider starting one. Encourage feedback from the participants and provide them the opportunity to relate their concerns and ideas to the pastor. Small groups provide an excellent ministry for the membership to appreciate the apostles' teachings and partner with the pastoral team to engage the inner city neighborhood. Spiritual and numerical growth will soon be apparent to the leadership team, the church membership, and the local neighborhood. Begin discussing this possibility in week two of this seminar study.

#### **D. Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. In the context of Acts 2, what does it mean to be devoted (steadfast) to the apostles' teaching?
2. Should pastors and leaders in inner city churches hesitate to proclaim the good news of Christ when facing physical threats or clashing with modern day cultures (such as anti-biblical views on gender and sexuality, pluralism, rejection of Jesus as the only way to God, etc.)?
3. On the day of Pentecost, 3,000 gave their lives to Christ. Do you think they needed structure to hold their lives together? Were the principles in Acts 2:42 central to that structure? If so, why? What other alternatives could there have been? Could the early church have been faithful to Christ without them?

4. For a time, the early church did not have a single compilation of the New Testament. Discuss how the apostles' teaching (their memories of Jesus' earthly ministry and teachings, the resurrection, and the Old Testament) sustained the early church.
5. Throughout the book of Acts, the apostolic teaching is foundational to all new church plants. Do we have reason to believe their teaching would be out of touch with modern day churches and that pastors and church leaders should abandon them?
6. Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, in *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work*, describe how Protestant churches across the United States are struggling, declining, or dying. What role can the Apostles' teaching play to help reverse this trend? The authors also observed that too many of these churches are focused on maintaining dilapidated buildings and struggling to survive rather than transforming their communities. How might churches both prioritize the apostles' teaching and maintain buildings that need attention? Have the group share their experiences with church leaders who invest more in building funds than using funds to generate evangelistic ministries.
7. Can you name any Apostles who remained devoted to their teaching while experiencing severe persecution (read Acts 4, 7, 12, 13, 28)? Did such trauma help or hinder the spread of Christianity? How?
8. Thom Rainer prays, "Lord, let me see my church with honesty and open eye, and grasp where we have gotten out of balance with inward and outward ministries. Also, give our church a vision to make a difference in our community. Even more, God, use me to be a catalyst and instrument for the changes that must take place in our church."<sup>108</sup> Discuss

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<sup>108</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 51.

how commitment to the apostles' teaching might create changes in the church that would help fulfill the desire of Rainer's prayer.

9. The Early Church was a learning church. What is a learning church? What was its subject matter according to Acts 2:42?
10. In Galatians 1:6-9, the Apostle Paul wrote, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and is turning to a different gospel—which is no gospel at all. Some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. However, if an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one, we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!" Discuss how pastors and church leaders should respond to apostolic teaching in light of this passage. Have you experienced a time in your walk with Christ when the pastor or leader of the church replaced the word of God with a substitute gospel? How do you feel about modern-day churches substituting the apostles' teaching (Bible) with self-help materials?
11. Do you feel a devotion toward apostles' teaching? If so, why?

### Week Three – Second Element of Spiritual Growth: Fellowship

#### **A. Provide a Brief Biblical Study**

The Jerusalem believers were not only steadfastly focused on the apostles' teaching, but also fellowship. The word in biblical Greek is *koinonia* and could be translated in our American vernacular as fellowship, communion, participation, or partnership; all depending on the context. For example, the Apostle Paul uses the word when explaining how Christians "participate" with

Christ when partaking of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 10:16-17). Luke uses the same Greek word when telling the story of how Peter and Andrew were partners (*koinonos*) with James and John (Lk. 5:10). The Apostle John explained it as a special communion with the "Father and His son, Jesus Christ" (I Jn. 1:3) and reasoned that the only way for fellow Christians to experience a kindred relationship with each other is to have *koinonia* with God (also confer I Jn. 1:7).

More often than not, fellowship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century church, is limited to social activities, such as potlucks, sporting events, sharing a movie, playing cards, or just having a cup of coffee. Though the biblical use of the term could be construed in select passages as the sharing of goods (2 Cor. 9:13), it is predominantly used in the New Testament within a worship setting. Eckhard J. Schnabel exclaims, "Fellowship is personal, brotherly solidarity of the individual members of the congregation, the followers of Jesus living in community brought into existence by the shared experience of the Spirit."<sup>109</sup>

## **B. Fellowship In The Inner City Setting**

Pastors and leaders in inner city ministries seeking spiritually healthy and growing churches must share in the needs of fellow believers. Sharing must begin in the body of Christ and expand into the inner city neighborhoods. As already discussed in week one of this seminar, the Jerusalem church was relentless (*proskartereō*) in their fellowship with each other and the Lord. They understood fellowship as more than community participation in social events and actively experienced it as meeting the physical needs of their fellow believers and encouraging spiritual unity. If true *koinonia* begins in the body of Christ, the church, it will spread to the community at large. Insight from Acts 2-7 suggests that when pastors and church leaders apply

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<sup>109</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). 178-79.

biblical fellowship in their church communities – sharing their lives and goods with those in need – the believers extend such fellowship to their neighbors.

Luke's narrative of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1ff) reveal the concept of stewardship in God's plan for the church and the sin of selfishness. Our possessions are not ours to keep, but to manage for God's use in helping others. Inner city church leaders and pastors must take steps to share their personal goods and church possessions with their neighbors. Sharing within the local community is a way of assuring one's neighbors that they are not alone in times of crisis. Of course, the heart of sharing is a heart of love (I Jn. 3:18). When the Christian opens his/her heart to biblical fellowship, racism is eradicated; all ethnicities become one in Christ.

Though I John's first letter is replete with this concept of loving (because God first loved us), the inner city pastor must be intentional in explaining that biblical fellowship does not excuse the sins of others. Those who walk in darkness (I Jn. 1:6), those who practice lawlessness (2 Cor. 10:20), and those who share in a person's evil deeds (2 Jn. 11), are not in *koinonia* with God, and therefore, not in fellowship with the church. The challenge for the inner city church members and pastoral leadership, is to practice the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 and share the gospel of Christ, without participating in ungodliness. Jesus provides a wonderful example of how this is accomplished when He called Matthew (Mt. 9:7-11) and Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:2-8).

Luke describes fellowship as meeting the needs of those in need (Acts 4:32). Inner city church leaders can capitalize on this concept of fellowship by helping those lacking in basic necessities (shoes, clothes, food, and shelter). They must consider how to use their resources to aid the homeless, drug addicts, mentally challenged, disabled veterans, and the elderly. They



must share in neighborhood programs that feed the hungry and build houses for the needy (such as participating with Meals on Wheels and Habitat for Humanity).

Another avenue of fellowship is for the local church members and leaders to volunteer their time as neighborhood chaplains, crisis counselors, and sponsors for sporting events. The church could host a community program to help people struggling to read or teaching English as a second language. It must become clear to the inner city pastor that true *koinonia* begins with the church leadership and extends to the congregation before entering the community. Once the process begins, God's blessings will follow, and the church will begin to witness spiritual and numeric growth.

### **C. Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. What is the biblical meaning of *koinonia* (fellowship)?
2. Does Luke's meaning of fellowship create financial discomfort for you? Explain.
3. Do you believe Christians could share with their neighborhood without sharing in their ungodly life choices? Discuss.
4. Provide a list of five ways in which your church could experience biblical fellowship in your neighborhood?
5. Has your church missed the mark about fellowship/*koinonia*? Share specific ministries that your church could demonstrate fellowship.
6. Many churches attach fellowship halls to their worship centers. What kinds of activities take place there? Is its biblical fellowship/*koinonia* or just people coming together to have a good time?

7. When churches neglect to be involved in the lives of the community (such as meeting their hunger needs), what negative impact does it have on the church? Conversely, when the church does help its neighbors, what positive impact is derived?
8. Discuss how the church contributes to membership decline when it does not see the benefit of engaging the community.
9. Charles Swindoll borrowed an illustration from Anne Ortlund describing *koinonia* in church communities. He explains how she compared it to a bag of grapes shaken in a bag that starts to drip. A peek inside revealed a mess, but they are mingling. And then she added, “Each life bleeds into the others.”<sup>110</sup> How does this illustration offer insight into Christian fellowship/*koinonia*? Discuss and offer an example.
10. Reflecting on Anne Ortlund’s illustration that “each life bleeds into the others,” since fellowship/*koinonia* is sharing, how would you apply this principle with other Christians? Discuss how you recently experienced true *koinonia*? Do you feel your church bled into each others’ hearts?
11. Fellowship/*koinonia* involves sharing of Christians’ relationships with Christ and each other. Do you feel it has many elements of a marriage? Do you consider it an unbreakable bond? Discuss.
12. Considerations for Pastors and Church Leaders:
  - a. Pastors, you have been given a charge to practice biblical fellowship. Are you fulfilling your charge? If not, why?

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<sup>110</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Acts. Swindoll’s Living Insights: New Testament Commentary* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale, 2016). 61.

- b. Pastors have you wavered between social fellowship and spiritual fellowship/*koinonia* in your preaching and teaching? If so, how important is it to you to correct this mistake in your preaching and teaching? Discuss.
- c. Pastors do you have a solid exegetical understanding of fellowship/*koinonia* used in its context according to Luke? Discuss how you build up and edify your membership to practice biblical fellowship.
- d. Pastor, share with your small group how the Holy Spirit influenced the life of the early church in fellowship/*koinonia*?
- e. As a pastor, you are called by God to give insight on fellowship/*koinonia* as doctrine implemented by Christ for the church. Do you believe this doctrine is relevant for modern churches? Based on your observation, how far have modern churches strayed from biblical fellowship?

#### Week Four – Third Element of Spiritual Growth: Breaking of Bread

##### **A. Provide a Brief Biblical Study**

Whether this reference to the “breaking of bread” was the Lord’s Supper celebrated by the church during the plenary worship on Sunday, or a reference to the weekly *shabbat* meal, or a simple gathering to partake of a common meal, is beyond the scope of this study. Further Bible study is always encouraged; nonetheless, with the preponderance of evidence in support of the interpretation that the breaking of bread was a direct reference to Sunday worship, this seminar guide interprets the expression as synonymous to the Lord’s Supper.

The key to a clearer understanding of the breaking of bread may be seen in its connection to fellowship. The disciples devoted themselves to a partnership that was expressed more fully in

the meals they shared and their prayer life together. Of all of the meals they would have shared, none was more meaningful than the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Though the Jerusalem church probably practiced the meal very differently from the Christian church of today – within the setting of the sabbath meal (Acts 2:46) or the love feast (1 Cor. 11:17-26) – it has retained its central focus; namely, a memorial of the Lord's death and glorious resurrection.

With the use of the expression, “breaking of bread,” in the early days of the Jerusalem church (Acts 2:42), there is no doubt that it precedes all other descriptive terms, such as Lord's Supper, Communion, or Eucharist. A reference to its celebration begins with Jesus on the night before He was betrayed when He celebrated the Passover meal with his apostles in Jerusalem. Soon after Jesus shared this Last Supper he was betrayed, arrested, tried, and crucified (Mt. 26:26ff). It is the ceremony of Christians participating in the bread and cup that some Christians call the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20) and others the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7). It recognizes the miraculous work of Christ's death. The New Testament scholar, Edwin Schnabel, conjectures that in the church in Corinth, and probably in other churches as well, the Lord's Supper was commemorated in connection with ordinary, regular meals (the traditional cup and meal) that the believers shared (1 Cor 11:17-34). The breaking of the bread occurred at the beginning of the meal, Jesus' words “this is my body, which is for you” would be remembered. After the meal, with the wine, Jesus' words “this cup is the new covenant in my blood.”<sup>111</sup>

At the Last Supper, Christ inaugurated the Lord's Supper as a memorial to him, suggesting that he had become the focus of their time of sharing food (Luke 22:14-22). Christ instituted this communal meal as an early church practice before his death (Luke 22:14-20). The

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<sup>111</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). 179.

setting for Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper is significant. Just as the Passover meal commemorated God's deliverance of his people out of physical bondage, so the Lord's Supper commemorated God's deliverance of his people out of spiritual bondage. The Passover meal was a yearly reminder of God's redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt. In Luke 22:19, Jesus is transitioning this practice of the Passover to represent himself. The cup and the bread, according to Jesus, represented his body, "this is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Jesus further elaborates that a new covenant is now in place, and should be proclaimed until the Lord comes again (1 Cor. 11:26).

The breaking of bread within its Acts 2:42 context, is a spiritual moment, and one that enjoins true *koinonia* with the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel accounts (Mt. 26, Mk. 15, Lk. 22) are clear. While they were eating, Jesus took bread, spoke a blessing and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is My body." Then He took the cup, gave thanks and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you" and "this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Christ gave both the bread and the cup his blessing, thus making this practice an act of worship.

## **B. The Breaking of Bread In The Inner City Setting**

Inner city pastors and leaders seeking spiritually healthy and growing churches need to be devoted to the "breaking of bread" with no less fervor than the New Testament church. As a command from Christ himself, its dismissal as a meaningless moment of our plenary worship is sinful and a sure sign that the body of Christ is spiritual unhealthy. When Christians do not adhere to and obey the commands of Scripture, they sin and fail to show gratitude for Christ's death and his atonement for sins. Partaking in the Lord's Supper reflects the Christian's devotion, not only to Jesus Christ, but to each other; as the breaking of bread is as horizontal as it

is vertical – a true expression of *koinonia*. A lack of leadership in understanding the need for a relational worship experience on Sunday with the breaking of bread and at other special times, weakens the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, and prayer life of the congregation.

The early church devoted themselves to the breaking of bread to remind them of the One who sacrificed himself for their sins. Instituted by Jesus in the upper room of a nameless friend (Mt. 26:26ff), the early church devoted itself to its practice. Pastors and church leaders who ignore the opportunity to break bread with Christ and each other, are living contrary to their faith and the gospel message, for the Lord’s Supper is a vivid reenactment of the good news – Jesus’ death and resurrection. Those who want to experience spiritual health and numerical growth in their ministry must follow this early church mandate.

### **C. Recommendations for Pastors and Church Leaders**

1. Preach sermons and teach classes on the biblical meaning of the “breaking of bread” in Acts 2:42.
  - a. Provide an easy-to-follow, yet sound, history of the breaking of bread from the Passover (Ex. 12) to its institution by Jesus in the upper room (Mt. 26; Mk. 14; Lk. 22).
  - b. Thoroughly explain the meaning, value, purpose, and benefits of this practice.
2. Celebrate the Lord’s Supper as an essential part of worship (Acts 2:42, 20:7, 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-27).
  - a. Encourage all Christians present in Sunday worship (members and visitors) to partake of the elements of bread/cup.
  - b. Prioritize this act of worship over other practices, that though enjoyed by the church family, cannot be traced to the early church.

- c. Encourage the church to participate in this act of worship on a weekly basis.
  - d. Have the courage to resist denominational tradition and follow biblical instructions of the practice.
3. Model the practice in your own faith and practice.
- a. Using Scripture (Ex. 6:6-7; 12:14; Mt. 26, Mk. 14, Lk. 22, 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-27) connect this worshipful moment with God delivering his people from bondage (Israelites from physical bondage and Christians – the new Israel – from spiritual bondage).
  - b. Disciple new converts immediately to participate in this practice.

#### **D. Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. Read and discuss the institution of the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26:26-29
  - a. Why is this often called the "Last Supper"?
  - b. Compare and contrast the meaning of the Passover meal to the Lord's Supper. What are the similarities? What are the differences?
  - c. Where did the Apostle Paul receive instruction concerning the institution of the practice (1 Cor. 11:23-26)?
2. Read and discuss the passage in 1 Cor 11:17-22 (*agape* meal) as it relates to the Lord's Supper.
3. What did Jesus mean when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:23-25)?
  - a. Jesus wants Christians to remember him in the Lord Supper/Communion. Do you agree to engage this practice?
  - b. Does your church believe this practice is a way for Christians to share in communion with the crucified risen Christ?

4. Should your church ignore the practice because it is not popular in some denominations?
  - a. If your church considers this act of worship as non-essential; why?
  - b. Should the practice be as relevant to modern churches as it was to the early church?
  - c. How often did the early church meet for the breaking of bread (Acts 20:7)?
  - d. Jesus said, “as often as you do this.” Could this be an indictment against those that observe the practice too little? Is there such thing as observing it too often?
5. Some denominations refer to the practice as Eucharist (derived from the Greek *eucharistéō*; literally “to give thanks”). Did Jesus give thanks before partaking of the bread and cup? Why?
6. Luke explains that the Jerusalem church broke bread in their homes daily with “glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). Is it necessary to partake in the Lord’s Supper every day or was this reference to another meal? Could a similar meaning be attached to a common meal shared with fellow Christians?
7. Paul said that as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26). How can we demonstrate this “proclamation” of our salvation in Christ to our community?
8. Could you in good conscience envision yourself as a Christian rejecting the breaking of bread/Lord’s Supper as commanded by Christ and shared in Acts 2:42?



## Week Five – Fourth Element of Spiritual Growth: The Prayers

### A. Provide a Brief Biblical Study

Even a cursory read through the New Testament reveals the centrality of prayer in the Christian's faith and practice, and the life of the church. The fourth element of worship listed by Luke and practiced by the Jerusalem church is "the prayers." It is the final element of their life together, another expression of their fellowship, and arguably, the core of their worship. The New Testament uses multiple words for "prayer", but the word Luke chose to use (*proseuchē*) is the most common and means "to pray, to speak to God, to ask God."<sup>112</sup> It is important to note the article "the" (*ho*) inserted in the Lukan text. As the biblical scholar J.B. Polhill observed,

The presence of the article in the Greek text before prayers has led some interpreters to see this as a reference to their keeping the formal prayer hours of Judaism in the temple. They may well have done so to some extent, for their faithfulness in attending temple worship is noted in 2:46 and 3:1. The reference, however, is probably much broader and involves primarily their sharing in prayer together in their private house worship.<sup>113</sup>

The context of Acts 2:42 lends itself to the above interpretation. The inner city church would do well to understand the centrality of prayer in its corporate life and vitality, and the source of God's power to ensure the church's spiritual health.

Prayer is continual communication with God about multiple elements (petition, confession, adoration, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession). Christian prayer is making requests to God, confident that he will alter a given situation according to his will. It is the belief that God will intervene (in the name of Jesus) in the circumstances of those who believe he can change the outcome requested (Matt 7:7-8). Answered prayer is God acting on behalf of the

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<sup>112</sup> J. P. Louw, & Nida, E. A. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. Electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 408.

<sup>113</sup> J.B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 119-120.

petitioner who is confident he will make a difference in his/her life. It incorporates every aspect of the believer's life (eternal and temporal, spiritual and material). In Christian prayer, God willingly listens to the desires of his people and often answers those prayers in unexplainable ways.

God is conscious of the needs of the church, and prayer conveys the passion for sharing those requests with God. Rooted in Judaism and empowered by the Holy Spirit in Christianity (Acts 2:17-21), the early church demonstrated a zeal for Christ that can be explained only by the power of prayer. Though all four elements of worship are intrinsically connected, it is the act of prayer that unites the church as one entity. Simply put, prayer is a sincere desire and willingness to communicate with God, sharing the desires of the heart, backed by strong belief and confidence that he will respond according to his will. Pastors and church leaders seeking to stop the decline in their churches must have intimacy with God and pray constantly (1 Thess. 5:17).

### **B. Prayer in The Inner-city Church**

If the goal of the pastor and church leaders is a spiritually healthy congregation, unceasing prayer is essential. Pastoral leaders of inner city ministries must be engaged in conversation with God continually. God and believers are in a constant reciprocal relationship as God responds to the petitions of his people. God can influence any condition if the one praying has faith. Jesus explains, "Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Mt. 21:22). God expects and looks forward to hearing from those seeking him (Phil 4:6). Pastors and leaders requesting God's will in all situations can expect God to influence their conditions (Acts 12:5). Believers must make prayer requests, and God promises he will intervene (John 15:7; 1 John 5:15). Leaders of churches cannot afford to abandon prayer.

Pastors that do not capitalize on prayer are doing themselves and their ministries a disservice. When leaders do not pray, it is impossible to have a sincere connection with God. When leaders neglect to pray, there is a disconnect from God. If leaders neglect to pray, there can be no true fellowship with the church. Prayer connects leaders both to God and to the church family. Partaking in prayer reflects Christian devotion to each other. Leaders who pray see an excellent opportunity to express their concerns and intercede on behalf of others. Since intercession is one of the many elements of prayer, leaders who pray demonstrate Christian love for the body of Christ. If prayers are not offered, spiritual growth will not occur, and issues will continue unresolved in the body of Christ.

A lack of prayer in the leader's life demonstrates neither love for God, nor gratitude for salvation, nor firm belief. It does demonstrate that leaders have fallen far from a healthy spiritual life. When church leaders fall short in their prayer lives, there should be no expectation for their membership to experience its power. Church leaders' prayer-lives provide a necessary model for their church membership. Pastors and church leaders who do not pray fall short of what Christian leadership requires, and they deprive themselves of communion with Christ.

Luke continued, "The early church devoted themselves to . . . the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early church did not neglect to acknowledge that the Apostles taught this essential practice. Pastor and leaders who follow Christ must continue to follow the Apostles' teaching in this matter. Jesus mandated, demonstrated, and exemplified prayer and the early church devoted themselves to it. As a result, they experienced the mighty works of God (Acts 2:43). Pastors and church leaders who ignore this practice will never see the mighty work God does through sincere prayer, and they are living indifferently to their faith; moreover, they must understand their faith in God is lived out through participation in face-to-face communication with God. Pastors and

church leaders must understand the practice is essential to their church, and there are no other alternatives given by Christ nor the Apostles to replace prayer. Pastors and leaders who want to experience spiritual health and numerical growth in your ministry, must follow the early church practice of prayer.

### **C. Recommendations for Pastors and Church Leaders**

1. Preach and teach sermons on the essential element of prayer – its meaning, value, purpose, and benefits.
2. Make prayer an essential part of worship.
3. Encourage all members to partake of the practice of prayer with such dedication that the church is known throughout the community as a church of prayer.
4. Prioritize the practice of personal and corporate prayer and approach it with an unwavering faith.
5. Ensure that all church ministries are inundated with prayer and invest ample prayer time in each ministry.
6. Encourage all members to pray for each other.
7. Deem prayer an essential practice for promoting church health and growth.
8. Encourage membership participation during church meetings, not isolated to Sundays.
9. Model the practice of biblical prayer in your faith and practice.
10. Disciple new converts immediately in the practice of prayer.
11. Offer congregational prayer times outside of regular worship services.
12. Install a prayer ministry for the local community and staff it with prayer warriors.
  - a. Create a prayer line for the ministry.
  - b. Offer prayers for the neighborhood (emergencies, salvation, and misfortunes)

#### **D. Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. How often do you come into the Lord's presence through prayer?
2. Do you set aside quality time to spend with God daily, a few times a week, or only in times of crisis?
3. Do you only enter the presence of the Lord when you attend worship services?
4. Can you recall a time when God's Spirit convicted you of sin?
  - a. Did you take the vice to him in prayer?
  - b. If you took it to him in prayer, did he respond?
  - c. How long did it take for him to answer the petition?
  - d. Are there any vices in your life you need to bring before the Lord?
  - e. Make a personal notation of them. Should you wait and try to work them out on your own, or should you take them to the Lord?
5. How often do you witness God answering prayer in your life? Is your public prayer life rooted in prayer?
6. When was the last time you came before God on behalf of the neighborhood? Should praying for people in your neighborhood a common practice? Explain.
7. Do you pray as aggressively for others as you do for yourself?
  - a. Do you allow personal flare-ups between you and your fellow Christians move you to pray less or more?
  - b. Can you remember times when you were convicted to pray for someone but hesitated for personal reasons?
  - c. Is praying for your enemies hard?
8. Do you see prayer as a tool of deliverance for both the Christian and non-Christian?

9. Can you write down the names of non-Christians that you know who are in need of spiritual deliverance? Discuss.
10. Ministering in inner-city churches is challenging. Is prayer essential? If so, why? If not, why?
11. Did the Acts 2 church find prayer to be practical for their Christian life?
  - a. How did that look in the lives of the Jerusalem church?
  - b. Is it applicable to the life of your church?
12. Read the following biblical passages – Rom 1:9-10; Eph 6:18; Phil 2:3-4; Col 4:2-4,12; 1 Thess. 3:10; 5:17,25 ; 2 Thess. 3:1; 1 Tim 2:1-2; 5:5; Jas 5:13; 1 Pet 4:7 – and discuss the question, “Do they shed light on effective prayer for the Christian’s life?”
13. The Apostle Paul’s prayer in Romans 10:1-3 is somewhat emotional because of Israel’s salvation. He knew the spiritual state of his fellow Jewish brothers, and he prayed that they might know Christ.
  - a. Knowing the spiritual plight of the neighborhood, can you recall praying like Paul for the lost?
  - b. Can you explain why prayer is one of the tools the church must use to affect change?
14. Do you petition God in prayer through Christ? How important is this to your journey of faith?
15. Discuss the biblical truth, that in order to have a meaningful prayer life, one must have a relationship with Christ (Mt. 21:21-22; 1 Jn. 1:1-4).

16. Do you feel the reason why God answers some prayer and not others has anything to do with volume or length of prayers?

- a. Does the Bible support long prayer?
- b. Does the Bible support loud prayer?
- c. Do you believe that long and loud prayer may be an indication of intense desire?
- d. Do you know that Scripture contains examples of both long and short prayers?
- e. Does your church find long and loud prayers offensive?
- f. Discuss your experiences. In some cultures, people think longer, repetitious, intense, and mechanical prayers more likely bring them closer to God.
- g. Should Church leaders try to clarify that a relationship with God supersedes all types of prayers?

17. In Jesus' sermon on the mount, he opposed attention-drawing prayer: "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others" (Mt. 6:5).

- a. Do you suspect that some public prayers are attention-drawing prayers in your church?
- b. Discuss the contrast (if any) between the early church style of praying and the prayers of today's churches.

18. The early church had less of a reason to give attention to themselves due to giving their attention to their membership.

- a. Have modern day churches fallen short when it comes to focusing too much on themselves and not enough on God and/or the body of Christ?

- b. Have modern day churches leaned too much toward praying for materialistic things than spiritual matters?
19. Will a faithful prayer life of the church, the pastoral leaders, and the membership advance their spiritual health?

### Week Six – Summary and Closing Thoughts/Discussion

#### **A. Provide a Brief Summary of Acts 2:42**

After the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), the delivery of the first gospel sermon by the Apostle Peter (Acts 2:14-36), and the subsequent repentance and baptism of 3,000 believers (Acts 2:38-41), the early church began to meet in homes throughout Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 12:12) where they continued steadfastly to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

The apostles' teaching included their recollections of Jesus' earthly ministry and teachings, their understanding of the Old Testament, and the good news of Jesus Christ – his death, burial, and resurrection. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the early believers were not only steadfastly focused on the apostles' teaching, but also fellowship. It is clear from Luke's narrative that the fellowship of the Jerusalem church was fully integrated in their daily lives, reaching a crescendo in their worship gatherings. Its connection to the breaking of bread is evident, as the disciples devoted themselves to a partnership (*koinonia*) that was expressed more fully in the meals they shared and their prayer life together. Of all of the meals they would have shared, none was more meaningful than the celebration of the Lord's Supper on the first day of



the week. Though the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread were central to their faith and practice, it was the power of prayer that ensured the church's spiritual health.

**B. Discuss the Following Reasons Why The Inner City Church Should Use the Acts 2:42**

**Model**

1. The four practices of worship – apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer – were divinely given to the church by God, enabled by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. They have no human origin.
2. The Acts 2 model encourages spiritual health and growth within the body of Christ, something the early church experienced daily. There was a constant increase in membership.
3. If understood as a construct, a spiritual framework to build a worship service, it inspires a genuine fellowship with God and each other.
4. Outside the Acts 2 model, no other model is given by God to counteract church decline. No biblical author has provided a more succinct and concise format for worship. There is ample evidence in Scripture for living godly lives, but scanty evidence on how the church should conduct its worship; perhaps due, to the clarity of the Acts 2 church.
5. No other model demonstrates a lasting and long-term biblical solution for pastors and church leaders who are facing decline and/or at the brink of closing their doors.
6. The Acts 2 model is designed by God, as opposed to the contemporary worship models designed by human hands.
7. These biblical principles are not optional and stand together as a single format for God's people; therefore, favoring one element over the other or omitting one altogether, may

well prove ineffective in the lives of the church. They were practiced as a unit by the early Church.

8. The principles existed from the beginning of the early church, and they have been tried and proven to work throughout the history of the Church. The Acts 2 model is ideal because it offers clarity and the principles are practical.
9. As a Spirit-led, unified model, these four elements of worship demonstrate closeness and commonality in the body of Christ. As a single framework concentrating on the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of love, it repels selfish ambition and other vices common among modern day churches.
10. The model is ideal for churches that want Christ at their center in both easy and challenging times.
11. These elements of worship serve to build spiritual strength when the church is gathered for Sunday worship, and during the week, when the believers depart to serve God on their personal journeys of faith. They are essential for living spiritually healthy lives amidst both believers and non-believers.
12. The model demonstrates caring and sharing for the entire body of Christ and not a select few. It prevents organized cliques and church discrimination. It helps eliminate favoritism which is prevalent among today's church leaders.
13. Such a construct gives church leaders hope for their declining and dying churches. It helps create optimism and something promising to look forward to that no other source promises but Christ. Remember the words of our Lord, "I will build **my** church" (Mt. 16:18).

14. The Acts 2 framework holds leaders accountable to the Scriptures for all activities in the body of Christ, as opposed to self-help materials and methods from secular organizations.
15. The model does not leave pastors idle and waiting for results; rather, it is designed for continual engagement. Leaders do not implement the model for a temporary fix; it was given by God to be a permanent foundation for the Lord's church.
16. The model always directs the pastor toward God and into much needed fellowship with him, through Christ.
17. When church leaders demonstrate the model in their neighborhoods, the body of Christ is seen as a unique people with hearts of love. The Acts 2 model is a great tool for when witnessing for Christ. It demonstrates that Christian love is poured out on all of God's creation – believers and unbelievers.
18. The Acts model is ideal because it gives inner-city churches the same theology it did the early church. They didn't have to figure out their church's theology; God made it available through Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the apostles' teaching.
19. The Acts 2 model is valuable because it encourages church leaders to evangelize (note every sermon in Acts and its centrality of the gospel of Christ). The Jerusalem church exemplified the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20.
20. It's simplicity does not allow room for wayward interpretations. The apostles' teaching reflects the gospel of Christ, fellowship is not just "meeting and greeting" but a genuine relationship with God and others, the breaking of bread serves to unify the body through the atonement of Christ, and prayer empowers the church.

21. The Acts 2 model is God's plan to unite all believers and unbelievers (through conversion). Social events may bring them together, but only Christ will keep them together.
22. The biblical model eradicates racism. The New Testament church accepted all ethnicities, from Jerusalem to Rome.
23. Implementing the Acts 2:42 model is an act of obedience to the Lord.
24. The Acts 2 model mirrors what every church should look like and it also sets the standard for all believers. It helps Christians to know how close they are to the Lord and it helps them to judge how far they have fallen away from the Lord.
25. This simple plan demonstrates that church leaders have a specific calling in ministry – to teach, fellowship, commune, and pray. When the model is taken seriously and applied, spiritual and numeric growth occurs.

### **Part Two – Epilogue**

There is no doubt that many multiethnic, inner city churches are dwindling in membership. In fact, the aforementioned applied and academic research in this thesis reveals that churches are declining at a significantly higher rate than they are growing. Causative factors to the spiritual and numeric decline in the inner city church may include a moral failure demonstrated by a member of the pastoral leadership team, or divisiveness among prominent members, or poorly developed and administered ministries, but the real culprit is the lack of biblical teaching, the absence of genuine fellowship with Christ and each other, a casual understanding of the breaking of bread, and the want of a viable prayer life – the Acts 2:42 model.

The apostles' teaching provides a knowledge base essential to spiritual growth. True fellowship binds believers as brothers and sisters in a healthy family. Communion creates a sense of oneness within the body of Christ, as the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian church, "We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). Prayer empowers the church to live a life worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1).

God's model must not be tampered with by church leaders choosing to practice part, but not all, of the Lord's worship plan; for example, encouraging the congregation to pray but never allowing the church family to experience the fellowship with the breaking of bread. Failure to implement the plan as a whole will prove ineffective for the church ministering to the inner city community. It must be consistently applied. Pastoral leadership teams who choose to implement the biblical model with a passionate faith, will experience spiritual and numeric growth.

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## APPENDIX A

### Sample Letter to Survey Participants

As a doctorate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of the research is to assess the health of inner-city churches, with an emphasis on the six principles of Acts 2:42-47, and I am writing to invite you to participate in a study.

As a church leader of an urban church with under 500 members, with your willingness to participate, you will be asked to answer survey questions and allow answers to be utilized in the survey. Surveys should take approximately 20-25 minutes. Participation in the survey is completely anonymous. Your name and other identifying information will be requested but shall remain confidential.

To participate, follow the Google Forms link to the survey below.

**[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1PdUnuFsTtOfW9coZ98R248enhQ2aoreTk12ovdPfa\\_I/usedform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1PdUnuFsTtOfW9coZ98R248enhQ2aoreTk12ovdPfa_I/usedform)**

For the survey questions, on the first page, after you click on the survey link, you will see the consent document. The consent document contains additional information about the research, but you do not need to sign the document.

Sincerely,

Art Foster  
Senior Minister – All Nations Christian Church

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 27, 2018

Art Foster

IRB Approval 3361.062718: Transforming Your Church Acts 2:42-47 A Historical Principles for Modern Day Churches

Dear Art Foster,

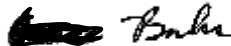
We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
The Graduate School

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.  
*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*