LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

SMALL GROUP PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF DISCIPLESHIP DEVELOPMENT IN

MULTISITE CHURCHES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Risha D. Bailey

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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Gary J. Bredfeldt, PhD, Dissertation Supervisor

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Lucas Farmer, EdD, Second Reader

ABSTRACT

Researchers indicated a clear and steady decline in discipleship development within the Body of Christ (Baldwin, 2016; Lynn, 2014; Saunders, 2009). However, the vision for the church, outlined within the Great Commission, remains the same; it warrants the conversion, production, and reproduction of Christ's disciples in all nations. The small group ministry and multisite churches are at the intersection of discipleship development, leading to effective disciple making. While small groups have been endorsed by many as the premier vehicle that helps the church fulfill its mission, multisite churches are heralded as those experiencing rapid growth with strong communities of faith designed to meet the spiritual needs of its members. However, it remains unclear how the two similar vehicles work together to develop mature believers who make disciples of Christ. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to discover small group participant experiences and perceptions as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. At this stage in the research, multisite churches were generally defined as those "churches with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p. 1). The theory guiding this study was found in Earley and Dempsey's (2013) Win, Grow, and Send model, which provides an in-depth look into the development process from believer to disciple and disciple to disciple-maker.

Keywords: Discipleship development, small groups, multisite churches

Dedication

To God my Father, who in His infinite wisdom, called and commissioned me before the beginning of time to pursue this endeavor. To Him be all the glory, honor, and praise for fulfilling His plan concerning me. With His love, guidance, provision, and support, I have kept the faith and won the race set before me. Without a doubt, in Him, I live, move, and have my very being; everything that I am and will be is due to Him, and for that, I am forever grateful.

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This journey was especially a joyous occasion for me, my children, grandchildren, and the community of supporters who cheered me on at every turn.

Thank you Chanaiah, who endured so many sleepless nights as mommy worked through her assignments and projects. Thank you for your patience, even when you did not quite understand what mommy was doing. Your hugs, kisses, and snuggles were always right on time to give me the extra energy boost needed to complete the task at hand.

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Lastly, Dr. Bredfeldt, I will forever remember your ongoing support, encouragement, leadership, and thought partnership. Thank you.

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Disciple Making (DM)

Discipleship and Small Group Survey Interview Questionnaire (DSIQ)

Discipleship and Small Group Survey Questionnaire (DSSQ)

In-Depth Interviews (IDI)

King James Version (KJV)

Small Group (SG)

Small Group Ministry (SGM)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Recent studies like *Barna Trends' 2018: What's New and What's Next at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* highlight dismal levels of engagement, a lack of confidence in church leaders, and an alarming number of Christians moving from absolute truth in God's Word to relative, moral truth. Consequently, it is not surprising that the church has struggled to fulfill the Great Commission with the magnitude and impact of these realities. The above study comes 17 years after Barna (2001) declared that the "state of making disciples of Jesus Christ who observed all that He commanded was dismal" (Lynn, 2014, p. iii).

Other researchers have noted a significant decline in discipleship development during this same time. Saunders (2009) stated, "Since the commission to make disciples, the Church has struggled with both the definition and scope of this call" (p.1). Lynn (2014) declared that "the state of disciple making is at an all-time low" as many churches "lack systems whereby a person can move through a process to become more Christ-like" (pp. 2-3). Then, Baldwin (2016) echoed similar observations when he said, "Disciple making has all but disappeared from the life of the church. This has left the church with a lot of members but very few disciples" (p. iv).

However, the Bible provides a clear example of how to create disciples. Baldwin (2016) stated:

> The original disciple making (DM) process consisted of Jesus finding a few men into whom He could pour His life, and then teaching them how to find a few men into whom they could pour their lives into. When Jesus left the disciples, He gave them specific instructions on how to continue the work that He had started. (p.1)

The atmosphere Jesus created with His disciples had a level of intimacy conducive to their spiritual growth and development. It laid the foundation for what has now been recognized as the small group ministry. While many church leaders, especially those in mega and multisite

church settings, are eager to implement small group ministries, "there seems to be a gap between what churches are trying to produce and what they are actually producing" (Jackson, 2019, p. 7). Jesus' command to be disciples who make disciples for Christ was articulated in the Great Commission and is also stated in John 8:31. He said, "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed" (King James Bible, 1984/1994, John 8:31).[1] He also said in John 15:8, "When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father." Consequently, it is the fulfillment of these scriptures that the church has struggled with for the past several decades.

Some researchers like Jackson (2019) believed that the church had lost its purpose and primary focus to help grow believers into disciples who make disciples for Christ. Jackson (2019) emphatically articulated it this way when he stated the following:

> The body has no clear plan in place for making disciples. There are very few disciple-makers in the church today, and if things don't change, the body of Christ may lose its effectiveness. The church has drifted from disciple making (DM) into convert making, and the desire to be like Christ has been reduced to a desire to have thousands of church members. What started out as the greatest movement in the life of the church has sadly become one of its biggest tragedies. (p. 2)

Other researchers like Earley and Dempsey (2013) believed that the focus has shifted from serving and giving glory to God to the personal service of man. This departure has subsequently and adversely affected the church's ability to fulfill its calling. Their research points back to the Great Commission-a mandate articulated for all believers in the Body of Christ to accomplish. According to Earley and Dempsey, glorifying God through disciple-making should be the undergirding purpose and obsession of the church (p. 15). Without this kind of

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version Bible (1984/994).

vision for church leaders, the Body of Christ may continue to experience a decline in discipleship development.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the key issues that have influenced the direction of discipleship development through the years, the research questions used to guide this study, and the significance of this study to help guide future discipleship development strategies for 21st-century church leaders.

<div align="center">**Background to the Problem**</div>

This section provides biblical, theological, historical, sociological, and theoretical insight into the purpose and dynamics of man's relationship with God and the overarching impact these factors have had on the development of mature believers in Christ. Ultimately, each of these perspectives impacts the other when understanding the church's struggle to continue the work of Christ. These perspectives equip and empower mature believers to become disciples who make disciples of Christ to the glory of God the Father and for the advancement of His kingdom.

Biblical & Theological Perspectives

From the beginning, God desired a relationship with humanity. This intimate fellowship with God was designed so that mankind would reflect His glory, "living and growing in reference to God's standard for humanity" (Kilner, 2018, p. 52)." God intended that people would fulfill their purpose as created in God's image by developing toward the fullness of what God's image entails" (Kilner, 2018, p. 52). As God's created beings, mankind's identity and purpose are aligned with Him. Winchell (2019) stated:

> all designers, potters, architects, clothing makers, etc. have an image in their minds of what they want their creation to look like. They then design it to reflect that image back to them and to others who will see it. Men and women are designed to reflect the image of a loving, holy God! (p. 4)

The absence of this revelatory information is detrimental to the discipleship mandate. Without this knowing, Winchell (2019) stated, "Mankind has lost their identity, turning strongly away from God's original design of them as children of God, loving and holy" (p. 6). However, Christ in His earthly form had this knowledge of who He was in relation to the Father and knew his respective purpose. Scripture reveals that Christ is the ultimate example as an "exact image" of what God's image entails, and without Him, mankind is not positioned to fulfill God's purpose. Undoubtedly, He becomes the standard of image-bearing necessary in understanding the connection between God and humanity. For humanity to reflect God's image, the people must have a relationship with Christ and be willing to "conform to the model of Christ's being and doing" (Kilner, 2018, p. 52).

Sin, which was introduced into the world through the fall in the Garden of Eden, has greatly impacted humanity's ability to reflect God's image and glory. Sin prevents God's glory from fully manifesting in humanity's lives and warrants the need for restoration (Kilner, 2018). The reality is that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). As a result, all of mankind requires redemption.

It is at this point in the history of God's relationship with mankind that Christ enters the world. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no man can come unto the Father, except by Him (John 14:6). Consequently, Christ is the only avenue by which humanity can be restored and redeemed from its sinful nature. "The glory that Christ has, as God's image, gives an indication of the glory — the glorification — that God has planned for people who have trusted in Christ to liberate them from the devastation of sin" (Kilner, 2018, p. 65).

Therefore, being conformed to the image of God and His standards for humanity begins at salvation or conversion (Romans 8:29). It continues through the transformative work of the

Holy Spirit as He sanctifies and grows the believer into a disciple of Christ. The process of conforming to Christ culminates as believers become disciples and disciples become disciple makers, those empowered and equipped to produce [more] disciples of Christ. Anderson and Skinner (2019) cited Genesis 1:27 and Matthew 16:24 as key scriptures that emphasize the "expectation for people made in His image, who profess to follow Him, to join Him in his discipleship mission" (p. 66).

Earley and Dempsey (2013) begin their book, entitled *Disciple Making Is…: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*, highlighting the many ways humanity can bring glory to God. "In every phase of our existence— salvation, spiritual growth, service, suffering, and bearing fruit— God has created us to bring Him glory" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 10). The authors continued, "It is in producing fruit that we prove to be His disciples. There is, then, an important connection between discipleship, fruit-bearing, and the glory of God" (p. 10).

While the connection between salvation, conformity to the image of Christ, and disciple making is clear, the church has struggled in completing this task. Some scholars believe the church has lost its focus and purpose over the years, focusing on all things except discipleship development (Erskine, 2004). He stated, "The church is called to make disciples. She must not become distracted by any other activity, no matter how noble it may be" (p. 3). While priorities may shift over time as ministry leaders explore creative ways to engage multiple audiences, the church must nevertheless understand and remain committed to its purpose of producing and growing Christ's disciples.

While discipleship should be a central focus of churches and leaders, shifting priorities is not limited to the church. This reality has penetrated many faith-based organizations whose missional objectives align with Christ and Christian formation, a key element of discipleship.

Similar to many churches, they too have, over the course of time, shifted their primary objectives to those less aligned with their founding principles. These principles are echoed throughout the book, *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches*. Authors Greer and Horst (2014) outlined how many faith-based organizations, from churches and institutions like Harvard and Yale, have lost sight of their original purpose. More specifically, they stated that "95% of Christian leaders attending a Los Angeles theology conference in 2013 confirmed that mission drift was a challenging issue" (Greer & Horst, 2014, p. 21).

Kauffelt (2012) recognized and agreed with the shifting priorities of churches and their misalignment to make disciples. He believed:

> The mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations. However, the church has lost focus of its mission to reach the lost people outside of the church. Over the last several decades, the church has become inwardly focused on itself and its members. This adjustment has caused most churches to be in a serious state of decline that many are on the verge of closing. If the church does not rediscover the biblical model that Jesus gave it, it could lead to the end of the church as we know it (p. v).

Further analysis was therefore required in light of the current state of effective discipleship development for today's churches. This analysis should drive believers and church leaders alike to ask hard questions to determine the root issues that have stifled their ability to honor God through disciple making. Does this disconnect, for example, exist between church leaders and their understanding of the call to disciple making, between leaders and their ability to identify effective systems to successfully help people transition from one phase of development to another on the road to discipleship and disciple making, in believers' lack of commitment to the process of effective discipleship development, or somewhere in between?

While these questions arose throughout this study, this researcher did not intend to identify the root cause of the church's indifference to disciple making. Rather, this study

investigated one specific phenomenon- the small group ministry within multisite churches- to examine its potential effectiveness in creating disciples who produce disciples for Christ.

Historical Perspective

Not too long after its inception in the mid-1700s, Sunday School became a prominent method for evangelistic outreach and spiritual growth within the church (Brown et al., 2008; Snell, 1999). Initially, according to its founder Ronald Raikes, Sunday School commenced for educational, moral, and behavioral equipping or enrichment for [poor] children, ultimately resulting in their personal and cultural transformation (Stetzer, 2011).

Many young people were listening to gospel-inspired messages that were interwoven into their curricula. Snell (1999) said that "Sunday Schools provided a basic religious education, one that was often informed by the late eighteenth-century emphasis on salvation through faith, which owed so much to Methodist influence" (p. 129). Since then, Sunday School became a flourishing model that churches from various denominations adopted to introduce people (mostly marginalized children and their families) to Christ.

The Sunday School movement had such a major impact on the church that during the early 1800s, attendance numbers exceeded those of traditional day schools, climbing to over two million students by 1851 throughout the United Kingdom (Snell, 1999). Their popularity and growth continued in the United States, and within 50 years, "records indicated that they established 61,297 Sunday schools involving almost 75 percent of the total western population" (Stetzer, 2011, p.1).

This movement was not only a catalyst for sound educational instruction but became a standard for religious instruction, faith, and character development. Indeed, their significance was instrumental in the transformed lives of many children and their families for over two

hundred years (Brown et al., 2008). While other subjects were taught, Snell (1999) reported that the central focus on religion was to aid the growing religious education of children (p. 129).

With that growth came many changes, including the overall purpose, direction, and change in terminology with the Sunday School movement being replaced with Sunday School programs. While it was not originally designed as a church growth tool, these programs evolved into a ministry that allowed many churches to help new converts grow in their knowledge of scriptures and godly principles to apply to their lives. The educational aspect allowed for regular fellowship and a level of accountability for spiritual growth.

However, while enduring many social and cultural shifts over the years, evangelistic growth associated with the Sunday School movement began to decline. Like Snell (1999), some researchers indicated an emerging decline began as early as 1906; others, like Brown et al. (2008), suggested a steady decline erupting after 1945. While Snell (1999) suggested additional theories surrounding the purpose of the decline (i.e., secularization or industrial reforms that impacted child labor), Stetzer (2011) posited that "Sunday school lost its edge because it lost its people-group focus" (p.2). Instead of focusing on the needs of people, it became more about ways to account for church attendance. Stetzer said, "Over time, Christians and churches did what they often do: they turned a tool into a goal. Thus, they knew they needed a Sunday school, but perhaps forgot why" (p. 2).

This brief historical perspective on how early churches fostered spiritual growth and discipleship development does not negate the appearance or effect of sermon teaching and Bible study. It does however focus the attention on the primacy and enormous impact of the Sunday School movement. Consequently, with the purpose of Sunday School and its diminished

significance in teaching biblical principles, the primary means of fostering spiritual growth and discipleship was lost.

This study assessed if the small group ministry, which has emerged as a preferred way to foster discipleship development, has come to replace the once flourishing Sunday School movement. Steve Gladden, in his 2010 article entitled "Small Groups Versus Sunday School" stated "The common notion is that Sunday School is a system that traditional churches cling to, while more modern and progressive churches move towards small groups" (SmallGroups.com, 2010, para 2).

His article posited that the two delivery methodologies have been at war as church leaders assess which of the two methods is best for their ministry. Admittedly, however, Gladden stated that "there is a general trend away from Sunday school and towards small groups" (SmallGroups.com, 2010, para 12). The reality surrounding these discussions, coupled with modern church structures like the multisite church, can assist Christian leaders in analyzing the potential impact the small group model has on these new church structures. Furthermore, it can help with determining if they are valuable means of effective discipleship development.

Sociological Perspective

Disciple making commences with conversion, the revelation of and confessed belief in Christ as the Redeemer and Savior of mankind. This process acknowledges the holy Lamb of God, whose death, burial, and resurrection satisfied God's wrath and reconciled mankind into a right relationship with Him. John 3:16 states all who believe in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. However, Romans 10:14 articulates, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 notes:

[18] All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: [19] that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. [20] We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Together, these passages of scripture tell a story that all believers are ambassadors of Christ called to share the gospel truths, the very message of reconciliation with others so that they too may be reconciled to God. This message ties very closely with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20); the call to preach repentance and the remission of sins (Luke 24:46-47), and to serve as Christ's witnesses to the world (Acts 1:8). All of these passages emphasize the power of evangelism leading to conversion and serve as the beginning point of discipleship development.

Earley and Wheeler (2010) stated very simply that "evangelism is friends telling friends about Jesus" (p. 9). The command to "go" lays the foundation for the church's evangelistic purpose. They also summarize 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, noting, "Evangelism is serving as Christ's ambassadors, His authorized messengers sent to tell others about Him" (p. 15).

Yet, many believers struggle to tell others about Christ from a sociological perspective. Perhaps this is because, as Earley and Wheeler (2010) described, some believers (most notably the younger generations) maintain strikingly different views about Jesus. The authors cite that in a recent survey, "63% don't believe that Jesus is the Son of the one true God; 51% don't believe Jesus rose from the dead; 58% believe that all faiths teach equally valid truths and 65% don't believe Satan is a real entity" (p. 27). Combine these statistics with Barna's (2018) survey that revealed that 36% of pastors do not believe they are effective in reaching the lost (p. 152). One can therefore see a growing disconnect between reaching the lost (evangelism), spiritual growth (discipleship), and empowering believers to make disciples of Christ (disciple making).

Reaching the lost was of utmost importance to Christ. He said "For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Yet, "More than half (55%) of those who attend church at least once a month say they have not shared with someone how to become a Christian in the past six months" (Earls, 2019, para 3). This is very problematic and stifles disciple making practices for the church. One cannot help produce disciples for Christ if they are not reaching the lost-those who need to hear the gospel message to "be delivered from the penalty and punishment of death that results from sin and delivered to an abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven" (Earley and Wheeler, 2010, p. 61).

According to Earls (2019), 56% of churchgoers are praying for the salvation of souls of the lost, but the same amount (55%) rarely acts on these prayers by actively engaging them. While prayers are warranted, the church is failing to fulfill its calling to follow in Jesus' example. He "was a friend of sinners, went into the homes of sinners, invited sinners to eat with Him, and came to seek and save the lost" (Earley & Wheeler, 2010, p. 49).

With this in mind, the church must be energized and mobilized towards a recommitment to making disciples of Christ. It appears that small groups have largely become a viable method to engage the lost and help them grow in their relationship with Christ. Heralded by researchers like Harless (2012), Yates (2012), and Walton (2014), the small group model has become a highly recommended means of discipleship development.

This study looked closely at the small group model's ability to effectively develop disciples of Christ within multisite churches. Multisite churches are simply defined as "one church that meets in multiple locations" (Frye, 2011, p. 2). They are known for their rapid growth, reaching the lost, and fostering thriving communities that are supposedly able to create effective discipleship development (Bird, 2014, p.3).

Theoretical Perspective

According to the Hartford Institute on Religion Research (2000), the multisite church began as an outgrowth of megachurches. On a very basic level, the multisite church can be categorized as "one church that meets in multiple locations" (Frye, 2011, p. 2). The multisite church movement continues to gain momentum even as this student's former church, Elevation Church, recently announced the launch of its 20th campus near Orlando, Florida. Listed in *Outreach Magazine's* List of the Fastest Growing Churches in 2014, Elevation Church continues to build momentum, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ across 24 campuses in the United States and abroad.

The concept of one church in many locations has been difficult to understand with its many complexities and layers. Many researchers undertook efforts to define this growing phenomenon. The multisite church has been defined as one that "meets in many locations but has the same core values, mission, administration, budget, treasury, and staff as a single site church" (Frye, 2011, p. 3). Researchers Surratt et al. (2006) united together and defined the multisite church. They stated:

> …the multisite church phenomenon, as one church meeting in multiple locations—different rooms on the same campus, different locations in the same region, or in some instances, different cities, states, or nations. A multisite church shares a common vision, budget, leadership, and board. (Frye, 2011, p. 4)

Perhaps the last to weigh in on the phenomena was Edwards; he stated that multisite churches are "those with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p.1), and they have grown by the thousands over the last few decades. As a consensus grew on how best to define a multisite church, other issues surfaced, namely, the theological and biblical validity surrounding their dynamic leadership structures and their ability to effectively connect thousands of believers through communities of faith.

Multisite Church Growth

Duke University's National Congregations Study reported over 8,000 multisite churches in 2012 (Bird, 2015). The *Leadership Network / Generis Multisite Church Scorecard* (2015) reported that "89% of multisite churches have 500 in current attendance and that 72% have over 1,000 in current attendance" (p. 2). However, this same report indicated that churches typically go multisite "in the 1,000-size range" (Bird, 2015, p. 8).

Herein enters the small group ministry concept. The small group concept is designed to foster a level of spiritual growth reminiscent of Jesus' development model with the 12 disciples. This approach is deemed as a central element of connectivity within multisite churches. While literature exists on the multisite church movement (Frye, 2011), its leadership dynamics (Cederblom, 2014), and biblical and theological foundations (Willis, 2014), it is unclear how multisite churches approach discipleship development initiatives.

Small Groups

While there are biblical and theoretical elements of the small group ministry, the emergence of the small group in the 20th century can be traced back to the days following the first world war. Walton (2014) begins the sixth chapter of his book entitled *Disciples Together: Discipleship, Formation and Small Groups*, referencing its explosion throughout the century. Driven by the demand for increased knowledge of the scriptures and religious studies, small groups emerged with the Society of Friends. This organization initially started with 35 "study groups" as early as 1919, with other groups like the Student Christian Movement following suit (Walton, 2014, p. 85).

Walton's work often interchanges the word small group with Bible groups-house churches that were prominent after the second world war during the mid-1940s, and cell groups.

While the terminology may have changed over time, all were established to provide opportunities for greater study of God's Word and Christian ethics (Walton, 2011). Ongoing growth and attraction to these groups continued throughout the mid-1940s and beyond. Walton (2011) confirmed that:

> There are many reasons for the increase in the use of small groups, including the growth of Mega Churches since 1960, charismatic renewal and the emergence of the Restorationist Churches in the late 1970s, the Cell Church movement in the 1980s, and the ubiquitous presence of Alpha and its rival enquirers' courses since 1990. (p. 100)

These groups were often influenced by the Oxford Group, which recognized the transformative work that occurs "by confession, conversion, honesty, and divine activity" (Walton, 2014, p. 91). Interestingly, many historical accounts of small groups imply that the secular world's desire for new educational methods is one that influenced the emergence of small groups within the church. Perhaps, in some regards, this is true in that the method was regarded as more of a method of the early New Testament church.

Nevertheless, irrespective of potential external influences, small groups continued to grow throughout the 20th century, fostering community, building relationships and faith among attendees, serving as a "key to deeper discipleship and missional engagement within our post-Christendom society" (Walton, 2011, p. 102). In addition, the earlier structures included both closed and open groups designed with specific and fluid purposes of spiritual growth, general programs, and increasing membership within churches of multiple denominations (Walton, 2014).

During Walton's (2011) research, small groups had steady growth over 30 years in the U.S. and the U.K. with seemingly great success. Many researchers, including Harless (2012), Yates (2012), Campbell (2017), and Jackson (2019) highlighted the value expressed by small group participants. Some of the perceived values reinforced the strength of faith-based

communities, relationships with members, commitment to worship, giving, and opportunities for practical application of faith-filled practices in daily life. Walton (2011) also acknowledged earlier small group studies conducted by Robert Wuthnow which emphasized the value of the small group structure. Nearly 50% of these survey respondents articulated an increased desire for spiritual growth. Moreover, 55% of respondents revealed how their participation in the small group encouraged them to share their faith with others, and 69% expressed an increased desire to serve others (p. 106).

Additionally, despite highlighting its growth and benefit in aiding spirituality among its members, Walton (2011) also suggested that many small groups functioned more like self-help groups that they were designed to support the needs of their members. He stated "participants prioritized personal qualities over action and thus revealed a notion of formation which is removed from encounter with the divine in the midst of the life of the world" (p. 106). He also conferred that there were internal challenges with the purpose of the group, citing proponents of individuality and "secularization from within" (p. 107).

Similarly, Withrow (2003) also argued that her research did not support the small group's strong discipleship development benefit. She stated that small groups, intentionally or not, reinforced "privatized understanding and practice of faith," and that they existed to help people "cope with life challenges rather than calling them to a more faithful Christian life" (Withrow, 2003, p. 142). Furthermore, she stated that "the groups that do focus on deepening discipleship often require a level of long-term commitment that not many members are willing to give" (p. 142).

Therefore, a great divide between the perceived ability of the small group model to develop disciples and disciple makers of Christ and the actual development of small group

members emerged. The disconnect does not lie with the model's ability to foster community, a key component of discipleship development in the New Testament church. Instead, researchers suggested a disconnect between the general spiritual growth and development of participants and their awareness of and ability to fulfill the Great Commission, which is to reproduce Christ in others. This study was designed to bridge this gap and bring greater clarity to the actual effectiveness of the small group model by examining the perceived experiences of multisite church small group participants.

Statement of the Problem

Many researchers like Yates (2012) and Jackson (2019) have sought to examine the principles and guidelines of the small group ministry as a means for effective discipleship development. The small group ministry continues to receive endorsements by church leaders and practitioners alike as a reliable vehicle that fosters spiritual growth, development, and disciple making among believers throughout the body of Christ. Similar to the small group ministry concept is the multisite church phenomenon, which also continues to gain popularity. Consequently, there was a need to further assess the impact and overall effectiveness of the small group ministry within this popular church setting.

Bird (2014), Stetzer (2014), and Banks (2014) stated that the multisite church is growing exponentially and is here to stay, with nearly 10,000 multisite churches in North America. This model has great potential to reach the masses and foster the community necessary for ongoing spiritual growth. However, it is not without challenges that threaten its impact and perceived success. Aside from leadership and structural complexities, questions surround the church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission, developing mature believers who can become disciple makers for Christ. Some researchers like Shelby (2011) and Frye (2011) suggested that the small

group should be the preferred approach to foster such development within multisite churches. Other researchers like Yates (2012) sought to examine principles, guidelines, and the overall success of the small group ministry as a means for effective discipleship development.

Jackson (2019), Donahue and Gowler (2014), and Walton (2011) assessed the biblical and theological aspects of the small group ministry. They proceeded to advocate for its overall effectiveness, from helping believers interpret and apply biblical passages to fostering community and fellowship with others. Moreover, they suggested the small group ministry can allow participants to grow in their faith, and they recommended it as a tool to facilitate discipleship development.

Nevertheless, the literature surrounding the impact of the small group ministry within the growing multisite church settings is anemic at best. Predominant literature on the multisite church phenomenon investigated the initial interest in the model (Frye, 2011). It also examined the theological and leadership aspects of the model (Edwards, 2016), ecclesiology in online multisite worship settings (Campbell & DeLashmutt, 2014), and the model's impact on Christian leaders (McConnell, 2009).

However, very little literature exists that examines the uniqueness of the multisite church model concerning how it encourages discipleship development. Furthermore, existing research does not speak to or examine if a multisite church structure is an asset of sorts that increases the impact of discipleship development through the small group method. Consequently, this research sought to understand the dynamic between discipleship development and believer perceptions of their spiritual growth and development through small group ministries within multisite churches. As a predominant method for discipleship development within multisite churches, it is critical to

understand the small group design's effectiveness in maturing believers into disciples who make disciples of Christ.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples. This study examined the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. Within the current research, multisite churches are generally defined as those "churches with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p. 1). The theory guiding this study and the impact of discipleship development on small group participants is found within Earley and Dempsey's (2013) *Disciple Making Is: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*. The authors outlined the growth process from believer to disciple and disciple to disciple maker within a community of faith.

Research Questions

RQ1. How did multisite church small group participants describe their perceptions of the purpose of the small group ministry?

RQ2. How did multisite church small group participants describe their comfort level in walking others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the small group ministry?

RQ3. What, if any, collaboration was there between the spiritual activities embedded in the design and structure of small group sessions and the perception of discipleship development among multisite church small group participants?

RQ4. How did the combination of survey research and in-depth interviews provide a more comprehensive understanding of multisite church small group participants' desire to walk others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the small group ministry?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

The following were assumptions that could impact the study:

1. The majority of participating small group members were born-again Christians who have confessed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Multisite church leaders understand the call to make disciples for Christ and have employed the small group ministry to accomplish this goal.

3. Small group members may be uncertain about their role in disciple making.

4. Participation in small group ministry was driven by the desire to connect with other members and build community versus the desire to grow into discipleship/disciple making.

5. Spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, studying the Word, and service to others were critical components embedded within the small group design.

6. Multisite church leaders were uncertain of and did not have an effective way of measuring spiritual growth among small group participants.

Delimitations of the Research Design

This study was critical to understanding how multisite churches connect their purpose and discipleship development practices to the small group ministry. Therefore, it was important to note that while seeking to understand the impact small groups may have in fostering discipleship development within multisite churches, this study was delimited to:

1. Fifty-eight multisite churches with at least one satellite campus and a minimum of 1,000 members united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA located anywhere within the United States. Single-location megachurches were not included in this study.

2. Actively engaged small group participants who were also members of one of the qualified multisite churches. Multisite churches that only employ traditional Christian education methods like Sunday school or weekly Bible study were not included in this study.

3. Small group participants 18 years or older.

Definition of Terms

The following terms have been defined according to the purposes of this study.

1. *Believer:* One who has confessed with their mouth the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of the Living God and has believed in their heart that God raised Him from the dead (Romans 10:9).

2. *Disciple:* A committed follower of Christ who "attaches himself to Jesus and will progressively take on the traits of his teacher" (Yates, 2012, p. 6). One who is committed to a lifestyle of obedience and submission to Christ to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20).

3. *Disciple Maker:* A disciple who produces disciples for Christ, according to John 15:8 and following the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20. "Those who constantly develop and deploy new disciple-makers" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 166).

4. *Disciple Making:* The act of "cooperating with God by using every available resource to help another person develop and become a multiplying disciple maker; and/or helping another person become a multiplying small group leader" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, pp. 166-167).

5. *Discipleship:* A lifelong process that involves "both becoming a disciple and being a disciple. At times the focus is on the entrance into the process (evangelism), but most often the focus is on growing in the process (maturity); it includes both teaching and life transformation." (Erskine, 2004, p. 8).

6. *Multisite Church:* Churches "with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p. 1).

7. *Multisite Church Satellite Campus:* A multisite church located in a different city, state, or region from its primary church and pastor.

8. *Small Group:* A small community of believers engaging in spiritual growth, edification, and fellowship within multisite churches. Small groups may be heterogeneous or homogeneous, may be geographically or sermon-based, and may follow the below formula created by Rod Dempsey. Using the GROUP acronym, they stand for the following:

   Guided by a Leader: A group leader leads the lesson/discussion and sees to it that the group's goals are being met. The leader also trains apprentices and turns in reports.
   Regular Meeting Times: Preferably weekly or twice a month. The goal is to meet often enough to get to know one another and recognize when someone is not connected or struggling.
   Opens God's Word: When the group meets, time is set aside to examine, read and discuss God's Word directly or through an approved curriculum.

<u>United in Serving:</u> Jesus said that He did not come to be served but to serve. Groups need to focus on serving inside the group and outside the group. Organize the group to involve as many people as possible. Match gifts with serving opportunities.

<u>Prayer for One Another:</u> Time is set aside to take prayer requests, pray for the group members' burdens, and pray for new people to come either to the church or group (Yates, 2012, pp. 4-5).

9. *Spiritual Disciplines:* The personal act of committing oneself to reading, studying the Bible, prayer, fasting, and serving God in a community of faith.

10. *Spiritual Growth:* "Spiritual growth happens during the discipleship process where an individual slowly transforms by the illumination of the Holy Spirit through growth in his faith, maturity, and knowledge of the Word of God and his relationship with God" (Campbell, 2017, p. 29).

11. *The Great Commission:* "The Great Commission encompasses two general mandates: (1) To evangelize all of creation (Mk. 16:15), and (2) To make disciples of all nations, baptizing them of the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Campbell, 2017, p. 28).

Significance of the Study

Sunday School was the primary means by which new converts grew in Christ at one point in time. Since 1780, the birth of the Sunday School movement "became so effective that it became the primary discipleship tool for many denominations. In fact, thousands have been saved, discipled, and educated through traditional Sunday school classes" (Yates, 2012, p. 3).

Sunday School models soon became obsolete as traditional churches evolved into mega and multisite church formats. For example, "a 2007 Lily Endowment-Gallup Poll revealed that some 15-20 million people met each month in some 800,000 Bible study groups that included mutual care. There are now more off-campus, church-related groups in North America than on-premise Sunday school classes" (Yates, 2012, p. 4).

Despite this monumental shift, the Great Commission still hangs in the balance. Souls are still at stake, and God is waiting for the remnant of disciples to stand up and respond to this mandate to make disciples of all nations. The demand for disciples and disciple makers is at an

all-time high when "only 1% of American church leaders say that today's churches are doing very well at discipling new and young believers and only 20% of Christian adults are involved in some sort of discipleship activity" (Jackson, 2019, p. 7).

With the growing popularity of the multisite church format, one must question how these recently evolved church models are positioning themselves to fulfill Jesus' mandate of disciple making. Has the small group ministry emerged as a new model for producing true disciples for Christ? Has it replaced the traditional Sunday School method for discipleship development? Is it effective within churches with thousands of members united under one primary pastor who shares the same vision, mission, and spiritual DNA spread across multiple geographic regions?

This debate continues on the overall effectiveness of the small group, with researchers like Jackson (2019) admitting that "efforts to build these disciple-making machines have resulted in an increase of Christian small groups and those involved in them over the last 30 years. However, "small groups are growing at the same time effective discipleship seems to be declining" (p. 7). Consequently, it was imperative to take a deeper dive into small groups' potential effectiveness and impact, especially within the evolved multisite church model.

Practically speaking, it is not enough to assume that these models are effective, but it is far more important and critical to the success of the multisite church to fully understand how the small group ministry allows them to fulfill the Great Commission. The current study underscores the implications for church leaders, evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of transitioning to the multisite church model. Additionally, this study positions current multisite church pastors and leaders to further assess and make necessary adjustments to the model for ongoing alignment to the Great Commission's mandate.

Summary of the Design

This study capitalized on the dynamics of quantitative and qualitative research methods in a mixed methods design. The goal was to leverage the quantitative measures to increase the generalizability of the study findings with the subjective, real-life experiences offered in qualitative interviews. Furthermore, this study sought to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the discipleship development experiences of multisite church small group participants.

There were many layers in this study design, which began with identifying qualified small group participants of multisite churches. Initial qualifications for multisite churches were those churches listed within the most recent *Outreach Magazine's* 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America's 2020 list, with a minimum of 1,000 average members, an active small group ministry, and located along the East Coast of the United States. Eventually, the East Coast geography restriction was removed, and the study expanded to multisite churches located anywhere within the United States. Fifty-eight churches served as the sample population for this study, and cluster randomization was used to identify the participants for this study.

Secondly, after the study's sample size was finalized, a quantitative survey was administered to gauge the experiences and attitudes of discipleship development of the multisite church small group study participants. The purpose of administering the survey to this larger sample size was to allow for greater generalization of the study results for multisite church leaders. The third phase of the study facilitated semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a random number of survey respondents who agreed to elaborate on their small group ministry participation experiences.

 The quantitative survey and qualitative interview results were analyzed and codified using Delve, a statistical analysis and data coding software tool, to better understand how small group participants described their process of spiritual growth and discipleship development. Overall, both instruments- the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews- provided a comprehensive assessment of the small group model's impact in fostering discipleship development and disciple making within multisite churches.

 Additional information regarding the study's design is covered in Chapter Three. However, before greater detail was provided on the research design and methodology, it was important to understand the framework of discipleship, disciple making, small groups, and multisite churches as revealed in the existing literature. These four items were subsequently examined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The call to discipleship and its practices, especially within the multisite church was of particular interest in this study. Many researchers like Harless (2012), Yates (2012), and Walton (2014) have become strong proponents of the small group model as a means of discipleship development. This researcher has had the privilege of participating in small group ministries as both a participant and small group leader in medium-sized (those with less than 500 members) and large multisite churches. In both settings, the small group ministry was seen as one, if not the primary vehicle for fostering spiritual growth and discipleship development.

Ample literature was available to explain and prescribe best practices for implementing the small group ministry. Biblical and theological literature provided solid support for this model, highlighting Old and New Testament systems or models of effective discipleship development. Although admittedly, the term "discipleship" is not used in the Old Testament. Further literature analysis provided the biblical structure and model for multisite churches. However, literature in the field stops there, with two separate issues on the table.

The current research was designed to fill this gap by analyzing the various dynamics of the small group ministry from the perspective of multisite church small group participants. Essentially, the research evaluated their understanding of the purpose of the small group and assessed their subsequent competency and efficacy as disciples commissioned to make disciples for Christ and advance the kingdom of God with the gospel message.

Theological Framework

From the beginning, God's desire was for intimate fellowship with mankind. The fall in the Garden of Eden did not interrupt or cancel His plan. God successfully paved the way for

sinful mankind to be reconciled back to Him through the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. As such, Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost, as it says in Luke 19:10, was the beginning, not the end of His ministry (Yates, 2013).

Before His ascension into heaven at the right hand of the Father, Jesus gave His disciples a command that remains today and continues to transcend time. This command was found within the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20, where Jesus charged His disciples to go and make disciples of all the nations. In his commentary of this passage, Henry (1996) noted that the command to "go and make disciples" was given from Christ's position of power and authority. He continued to state that this command was first given to His chief apostles, "those architects that laid the foundation of the church," and "to their successors, the ministers of the gospel, whose business it is to transmit the gospel from generation to generation" (Henry, 1996, para 1). The author continued that Jesus' command to "go" was one rooted in encouragement for the journey ahead. Jesus stirred up His disciples so they could disperse and spread the gospel all over the world (Henry, 1996). Several commentators agreed that this command was not limited to the original disciples but to all who, "in every age, would take up from them the same work" (Jamieson et al., 1871, para 4).

As the disciples embraced this charge, they were challenged to demonstrate Christ-like character to guide others through a process in which they too would come to know, love, obey and imitate Christ in all manner of being. A two-fold precedent was established through Christ in His interactions with His disciples and embedded within the Great Commission. As Lynn (2014) highlighted:

> Being a disciple of Christ is someone who is not only becoming more Christ-like but one who is fulfilling the Great Commission of making disciples who are obeying the two Great Commandments to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,' and to 'love your neighbor as yourself.' (p. 1)

Both individually as disciples and corporately as the Body of Christ, the church's purpose

is to imitate Christ and make disciples in His name. John 15:8 states, "Herein is my Father

glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so, shall ye be my disciples." John 15:16 quotes Jesus, "Ye

have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth

fruit and that your fruit should remain." Earley and Dempsey (2013) emphasized the significance

of the Great Commission for individuals and the corporate church saying, "The Great

Commission is God's will for all believers. It is not a suggestion; it is disciple making, and this

disciple making involves going, preaching, baptizing, and training" (pp. 2-5).

Earley and Dempsey (2013) elaborated further by saying:

> These final instructions were repeated on three separate occasions and are the only
> commands of Jesus that are recorded in all four Gospels and the book of Acts (Matt
> 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). It was as if He was telling
> them, "Look, I keep repeating this one thing because it is the main thing. If you don't do
> anything else, be sure and do this! (p.2)

The Great Commission is not optional for disciples, and when believers act as the early

apostles did-going, preaching, teaching, and baptizing-they bring glory to God. The early

apostles forsook all and followed Christ, making disciples, and allowing the mandate of the

Great Commission to order their steps. This should become a priority for many churches. Earley

and Dempsey (2013) posited that it should be an obsession for the church to glorify God and

fulfill its purpose.

However, the church cannot jump into discipleship without first having developed its

disciples. Earley and Dempsey (2013) stated that "the church must be in the absolute middle of

God's global plan of making disciples" (p. 39). Additionally, Christians are called out of the

world and sent on a mission. The scripture states, "As the father has sent me, I also send you"

(pp. 42-43). As believers (the newly converted) become mature followers growing in Christ's

likeness in thought and deed (disciples), they are to be positioned to make disciples for Him (discipleship).

Becoming a disciple of Christ is a process that extends beyond initial belief in Him. James 2:19-20 states, "Thou believeth that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" It should be noted that this faith with works is, in fact, the process of becoming Christ's disciple. Yates (2012) drew a line between believer and disciple. He stated that a disciple or a committed follower of Christ is one who "attaches himself to Jesus and progressively takes on the traits of his teacher" and one who is "committed to a lifestyle of obedience and submission to Christ and fulfilling the Great Commission" (p. 6).

Anderson and Skinner (2019) echoed this sentiment as they acknowledged that "Christ calls all believers to be disciples and in turn to disciple others" (p. 66). They continued by highlighting a distinction between the newly converted believer and a disciple. They stated, "Church communities, pastors, and spiritual directors disciple by coming alongside fellow believers to encourage and exhort them to respond to God's calling" (Anderson & Skinner, 2019, p. 77). The church must understand this and dedicate itself to guiding believers through a process whereby they grow into mature disciples (becoming more Christlike as students and committed followers of Him). These new followers must embrace their call to make more disciples for the kingdom.

Disciple

As simple as it might seem however, the word disciple has come to have various meanings within the Body of Christ, with theologians and practitioners agreeing on some, but not all aspects of the term. For example, Barna (2001) defined a disciple as "someone who is a

learner or follower who serves as an apprentice under the tutelage of a master" (p. 17). As followers of Christ, disciples are expected to endure hardness as a good soldier, to take up their cross and follow Christ-intentionally ascribing to His teachings, His character, His way of living, and of His commitment to do His will. Lynn (2014) said "disciples of Jesus are people who do not just profess certain views as their own but apply their growing understanding of life in the King of the Heavens to every aspect of their life on earth" (p. 5). "J. Dwight Pentecost defines a disciple as one who has a love for the person of Christ, confidence in the word of Christ and is completely committed to Christ in service and obedience" (Lynn, 2004, p. 17).

The distinction between Christian, a term used only three times in the New Testament, and disciple, a term used some 269 times in the New Testament (Lynn, 2014, p. 5) is significant. Barna (2001) denoted disciples are those that "must learn and understand the principles of the Christian life, obey God's laws and commands, represent God in the world, serve others, and reproduce themselves in Christ" (pp. 21-23). Similarly, Putman and Harrington (2013) summarize a disciple as one who follows Christ, "knowing that Jesus is now the one in charge of their lives, and as one who is transformed by Jesus to be fishers of men" (p. 47).

Submission, service, obedience, and reproduction are all common themes within these brief descriptions of the term disciple. One then deduces that the disciple lives a submitted and purposeful life of service before Christ and advances His kingdom. Another recurring theme in many disciple definitions is that of lifestyle. The lifestyle theme infers that being a disciple of Christ is more than confessing belief in Him or His redemptive works, but rather exhibiting a committed way of living that pleases Him, fulfills the Great Commission, and brings glory unto God the Father. Early and Dempsey (2014) also prefer the term disciple over Christian. They said that Jesus,

in demanding them to make disciples, was assuming they were already living as disciples. In commanding them to obey everything He demanded He was assuming they were already obeying everything He had commanded. Therefore, before you can make a disciple, you need to be a disciple. (p. 49)

Discipleship

The word "disciple" is a noun that refers to the person who willingly and intentionally commits their life to follow the teachings of Christ and incorporate those teachings into their daily lives. However, discipleship is a process of development for disciples. Barna (2001) defined discipleship as the process of "becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ" (p. 17). This involved "two complementary components: (1) becoming a committed, knowledgeable, practicing follower of Jesus, and (2) instilling that same passion and capacity in others" (p. 24). Drissi (2019) provided a very in-depth explanation of discipleship, stating:

> Christian discipleship is the process by which disciples grow in the teachings of Jesus Christ and are prepared by the Holy Spirit, who resides in their hearts, to overcome the pressures and trials of this present life and become more and more Christ-like. This process requires believers to respond to the Holy Spirit's prompting to examine their own thoughts, words, and actions and compare them with the Word of God. This requires studying the Word, praying over it, and obeying it. In addition, the disciple should always be ready to offer testimony of the reason for the hope that is within them and to encourage others to follow Jesus as disciples. (p. 217)

From the few definitions above, one observes that there is no consensus surrounding the meaning of discipleship. Even more, some researchers oscillate between discipleship and disciple making. For example, while researchers like Chai (2015) make slight distinctions between the two words, others gravitate towards one. Lynn (2014) appeared to prefer disciple making, describing it as the following:

> The process by which one helps another become a follower of Christ. It is not limited to evangelism, although that might be a component of it. Nor is disciple making limited or relegated to the paid professionals. [Rather] disciple making is investing in someone's life in order to help them become a disciple-maker. (p. 7)

However, Erskine (2004) denoted a primary difference between discipleship and disciple making. He posited that it is solely rooted in the mandate from the Great Commission. He described discipleship as the act of "both becoming a disciple and being a disciple, with a focus on the process of evangelism and spiritual maturity" (p. 8). On the other hand, he stated disciple making is:

> seeking to fulfill the imperative of the Great Commission by making a conscientious effort to help people move toward spiritual maturity, drawing on the power and direction of the Holy Spirit, utilizing the resources of the local church, and fully employing the gifts, talents, and skills acquired over the years. (p. 8)

As Drissi (2019) and Erskine (2004) highlighted, one major aspect of discipleship is the process of spiritual growth and maturity. The fruit of this process may manifest in specific and varying ways in the life of every believer over time, as they increase time for devotion, the reading and studying of God's Word, prayer, fasting, and fellowship with other believers. Earley and Dempsey (2013) articulated three discipleship stages that build upon spiritual maturity. Their stages ranged from conversion and declaration of one's faith in Christ to a level of complete immersion into the knowledge of God, the abandonment of one's personal agenda, apprenticeship into ministry, and the commissioning into the world to make disciples for Christ.

For Earley and Dempsey (2013), the second stage of this discipleship development is likened to "the initial level of a rabbinical apprenticeship with the Rabbi" (p. 59). The final stage is the climax of the Great Commission with mature disciples who are now ready to reproduce Christ in others. However, no matter what perspective one uses to evaluate discipleship, it is noteworthy that time, practice, accountability, and reproduction or multiplication are key factors that cannot be ignored for an effective discipleship process.

The Process of Discipleship

The process of discipleship is not clear. Many scholars and theologians have proposed various steps and stages to describe this process. Some of these steps are separate; few are building upon the other, while others overlap and work together to mature believers over time. Furthermore, while there are traces of this concept in the Old Testament, many scholars delve deeper into the process by analyzing Jesus' ministry in the New Testament.

Drissi (2019) admitted that the Old Testament completely omits the word disciple, and he began his research and study on the concept with the synoptic gospels. However, throughout Drissi's (2019) work, he has a singular reference to the rabbinic system where Jewish disciples would, upon completing their studies, "separate themselves from their rabbi and teach in their turn" (p. 219).

Erskine (2004), however, provided a little more context concerning discipleship in the Old Testament, hinting that the absence of the word did not indicate a lack of evidence for the dynamics of discipleship. "Evidence for the existence of master-disciple relationships in the Old Testament is found in a limited way in the terms *talmidh* and *limmudh* and in the social structures of the prophets, the scribes, and wise men" (Erskine, 2004, p. 19). The author proceeded to elaborate on the rabbinic traditions while also referencing the relationship between Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, as well as the School of the Prophets. Lastly, he concluded that the Old Testament systems were designed to reveal the truth about God through his prophetic Word, law, and wisdom in a mutually supportive relationship (Erskine, 2004).

Similarly, without citing any particular individual or group, Earley and Dempsey (2013) also use traditional rabbinic language to describe the process of discipleship in the Old

Testament. The authors noted the cultural references to the relationship between teacher and student, or master and disciple.

In his work, Chai (2016) passionately argued for believers to assess the historical and theological aspects of discipleship through the book of Acts, stating:

> Since Acts gave an orderly account of how the early church fulfilled the Great Commission, it would be blatant disobedience to ignore making disciples in their post-Pentecost ministry setting. Thus, any intelligent reading of the book of Acts must embrace the idea of discipleship as its backdrop. (p. 8)

This researcher was inclined to agree with Chai's assessment and preference to use the book of Acts as a backdrop due to the New Testament's influence on the discipleship process. Specifically, referencing the Earley and Dempsey's (2013) three-stage process, one can readily see the progression from one stage to the next-from believer to disciple, and from disciple-to-disciple maker. As led by the Holy Spirit, the apostles gently guided individuals through these phases, as newly converted believers declaring their faith in Christ (believer stage). Then, through community and the practice of spiritual disciplines, mature believers transitioned into committed followers (the disciple stage) and lastly to the deployment or commission for reproduction (disciple making stage).

Lawson (2013) also drew on the New Testament for insight into the process of effective discipleship. He analyzed the effectiveness of discipleship through Jesus and Peter's ministries, specifically noting how Peter essentially imitated the process he completed with Jesus. Lawson (2013) also proposed that discipleship occurs in three stages, describing it as "(1) teaching, (2) modeling, and (3) commissioning" (p. 6). Lawson believed that Peter leveraged his ministry to enhance and reinforce the act of discipleship development.

Whether one looks through the lens of the rabbinic system referenced by Erskine (2014), Drissi (2019), Earley and Dempsey (2013), or through Jesus and the apostles in the New

Testament, it is important to note that the relational aspect between teacher and student is paramount. Jesus was often called rabbi (Luke 7:40, Luke 12:13, John 1:38, John 3:2), and as a rabbi, he taught and trained His disciples in a similar fashion to Jewish law.

The decision to follow manifested in the three years of the disciple's life as he forsook all and immersed himself in the teaching and training of his rabbi/teacher. Earley and Dempsey (2013) revealed that "… [the disciple] would have to memorize His words and replicate His lifestyle. By following him, they were choosing to be with him, to learn from him, and to become like him" (p. 68). Chan and Beuving (2001) said:

> Disciples in Jesus' day would follow their rabbi (which means teacher) wherever he went, learning from the rabbi's teaching and being trained to do as the rabbi did. The whole point of being a disciple of Jesus was to imitate Him, carry on His ministry, and become like Him in the process. (p. 16)

This process of becoming like Christ in the traditional rabbinic sense is witnessed in the New Testament, but with a slightly different approach. One major difference from the traditional Jewish rabbinic system is that "the disciple of Jesus attached themselves to Him and became devoted not to a doctrine but to a person" (Drissi, 2019, p. 219). Erskine (2004) agreed and acknowledged how Jesus' alterations to the traditional rabbinic system was a great cause for criticism among the religious teachers of the law, whose goal was to "make disciples of themselves rather than disciples of God" (p. 20). He continues to state that, "the goal of the Jewish tradition was to pass along information…of passing the tradition rather than changing lives" (p. 21).

However, Jesus' command to "follow Me" required an intimacy with Him that could only be summarized through submission, abandonment, and adherence/immersion of one follower disciple unto his master teacher, Jesus Christ. "The goal of Jesus' call was not these individuals

would themselves become a master or teacher, but that they would be a minister of the will of God (Matt 23:8-10)" (p. 21).

Earley and Dempsey's (2013) second phase highlight key steps found in Jesus' process of discipleship that support preceding literature: immersion into a deeper relationship with Him (Jesus), immersion into a Christian community, immersion into the words of Jesus, and immersion into ministry (pp.69-74). These subprocesses are designed to bring the disciple closer to modeling their teacher's behavior (Jesus).

Putman and Harrington (2013) described the discipleship process in greater detail and realized it through five stages and four spheres in their book *Discipleshift.* The linear nature of the five stages included: (1) being spiritually dead, (2) becoming an infant, (3) growing into a child, (4) maturing into a young adult, and (5) becoming a parent. Not surprisingly, each stage and subsequent spheres were relationally based, facilitating growth and adherence to God's Word through a relationship with Him, the Body of Christ, one's family life, and the world (p. 78).

Lawson (2013) echoed the relational aspect of discipleship when he said, "While Jesus modeled solitude, prayer, and a variety of spiritual disciplines, He never asked His followers to completely withdraw from society and culture. Jesus' model and pattern of discipleship involved actively engaging the culture with the gospel" (p.22).

To effectively navigate discipleship development, one must be motivated by love, a love of God and for His people. According to Chan and Beuving (2001), this love "changes us from the inside out and redefines every aspect of our lives" (p. 22). This love relationship for God leads disciples to employ certain disciplines and practices that help develop the whole person in spirit, soul, and body concerning the communities around them.

Characteristics of Discipleship

While the above represents a high-level summary of the various discipleship processes, there are deeper levels embedded throughout each phase of the process, notably learning the purpose and power of scripture reading, prayer, worship, fasting, serving, and even suffering. The pilgrimage for true disciples does not rest in theology alone but rather in daily practice as doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:22).

Submitting to the authority and the lordship of Christ, picking up one's cross, counting the cost, and following Him is a decision of the will. Jesus says in John 10:15-18 that no one takes His life, but that He [willingly] lays it down for the sheep. This statement implies that He knew what was expected of Him, and He willingly chose to engage in this level of sacrifice. This willing obedience unto the Father is also seen in Philippians 2:8, where Christ, "being found in fashion as a man, humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

Disciples in the process of becoming more Christ-like must also willingly decide or choose to participate in the discipleship development process, and it must be an act of their will. Porter (2019) stated, "Just as Jesus willingly engaged various practices to remain in alignment with the will of His Father, we too, utilize our embodied wills to bring our lives into life-giving alignment with the will of the Father" (p. 80). This concept leads to a discussion about will and character related to discipleship development.

Personal Disciplines

Chandler (2015) spoke to Christian educators on key points that were applicable inside and outside the educational arena and found their place in the development of Christ's disciples. She stated:

> What makes learning expressly Christian is the process of being conformed to the image of Jesus, such that all human dimensionality is to be shaped to reflect Christ's character

and thus divine glory, which supersedes the mere acquisition of knowledge and a Christian worldview. (p. 314)

"All human dimensionality" encapsulates the mind, the soul, the will, and the emotions. It speaks to the necessary discipline and personal practices that one employs to develop Christlike character. Putman and Harrington (2013) described this as "a disciple understanding God's command and submits to his authority (head), is transformed by Jesus (heart), and joins Jesus on a kingdom mission (hands) in all areas of their lives" (p. 78).

The transformation of the heart and the will are appropriate prerequisites for the action that permeates through the hands. Drissi (2019) said, "praying, fasting, and giving to those in need for an audience of one turns these practices into means of drawing near to the gracious presence of God surrendering our wills to the will of the Father," which essentially helps one to become more like Him (p. 88).

Concerning developing the spiritual disciplines, John Chrysostom had "a powerful and vigorous Christian spirituality which sought to hold together prayer and ethics" (Lawson, 2013, p. 22). Nevertheless, researchers like Barna (2001) and Lynn (2014) reported that many believers struggle to effectively incorporate these into their daily lives.

Lynn (2014) opened his work by highlighting the adverse impact underdeveloped disciplines have on believers' lives. His research revealed that the lack of attention to the spiritual disciples of the faith, "such as prayer, scripture reading, fasting, community, and evangelism, is at an all-time low in America" (p. 22) and leads to stalled growth and development in the life of an otherwise growing disciple (p. 38).

Lifestyle Implications

The process of becoming a mature disciple of Christ is a never-ending one and one that touches every aspect of the disciple's life. Barna (2001) said, "Jesus' own lifestyle exemplified

the ways in which He expect us to live, through His love and service to those He encountered. Throughout His ministry, He demonstrated worship, evangelism, discipleship, stewardship, service, and fellowship" (p.58). Therefore, these same elements must also be reflected in the life of every believer as they grow into mature disciples of Christ.

The Bible is rich with commands to follow Jesus' example. Joshua 1:8 and Psalms 1:2 commands believers to meditate on God's Word day and night. Psalms 29:2 and 95:6 encourages believers to worship the Lord for the beauty of who He is, while 1 Thessalonians 5:17 commands believers to pray without ceasing. Additionally, the scriptures are filled with admonishments to fellowship, love, support, and pray for each other throughout the book of Acts and within the Pauline epistles. Lastly, 1 Peter 3:15 encourages believers to always be ready to give an account for the hope that lies within them.

However, Barna's (2001) research revealed that "less than one-quarter of all born-again adults consciously strive to make worship part of their lifestyle, and that in a given week only 32% volunteer at the church, while 62% read the Bible other than at church" (p. 60). Barna's research also indicated that born-again believers lack the confidence and self-efficacy to effectively share the gospel message. This sheds light on why "most unchurched respondents to a national survey said they had never been invited to church or told what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, and never invited to embrace Jesus as their Lord and Savior" (Barna, 2001, p. 62).

Similarly, Lynn's (2014) research revealed similar deficiencies when it comes to scripture reading, fasting, and praying. Study participants expressed frustration in reading and understanding scripture, inconsistency with prayer, the lack of understanding of the value of fasting, and lackluster attempts by Christians to share the gospel message with those in their immediate communities.

Ogden (2010) outlined several factors for the decline in true discipleship, which at its core reflects a malnourished lifestyle among believers. Ogden (2010) said, "We have reduced the Christian life to the eternal benefits we get from Jesus, rather than living as students of Jesus or being conformed to the life of Jesus" (p.46). He emphasized that "we have made discipleship for super-Christians, not ordinary believers" (p. 48). Lynn's (2014), Ogden's (2010), and Barna's (2001) research was disheartening and underscored the need for believers to reassess their commitment to the teachings of Christ, and the church's responsibility to reexamine how to guide believers through this process.

Theoretical Framework

Barna (2001), Ogden (2010), Byrd (2011), Putman and Harrington (2013) are researchers and practitioners who have studied the scriptures and conducted various types of research to understand the discipleship process and its implications for its success in the 21st-century church. More importantly, their collective research underscored how churches need to do more than disseminate knowledge about the Great Commission; they must work to develop Christ's disciples. Their work moves the conversation further by guiding ministries to move from being a hearer of the Word to become a doer of the Word (James 1:22). Their research offered slightly variant theories and methodologies for how the church can develop spiritually mature disciples engaged in intentional disciple making to fulfill the Great Commission.

Understanding the necessity of establishing a methodology for discipleship development should not come as a surprise. Since the beginning of time, God has outlined specific ways His children were to interact with Him and others. The entire book of Leviticus supported this concept, as it outlines in great detail specific ways for worship, sacrificial offerings, and methods of atonement enacted by the Levitical priests. "It contains civil, sanitary, ceremonial, moral, and

religious regulations for the nation of Israel. All the offerings and the ceremonies and laws served to constantly remind Israel that God was eminently holy" (Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, 1994/1984, p. 139). God erected specific methods or procedures for how to do life with Him. The same principles continue throughout the Bible and can be seen within Jesus' ministry even as He teaches His disciples how to effectively pray unto the Father in Luke 11:1-13 and Matthew 6:9-15.

Like those referenced above, researchers have underscored the inherent value in identifying and creating effective methodologies for discipleship development. It would appear from the literature review that the most effective method for creating disciple makers for Christ was at best three-fold. First, researchers agreed that the most fundamental premise for discipleship development was that it must begin with the believer's relationship with Christ and their spiritual growth and development. Barna (2001) said, "Discipleship…is about being and reproducing spiritually mature zealots for Christ" (p. 18). He observed from Jesus, Paul, and John the Baptist's ministries that "discipleship is both being disciples and producing disciples of Christ and facilitating" (p. 26). In like fashion, Earley and Dempsey (2013) stated that "before you can make a disciple, you need to be a disciple" (p. 49).

Secondly, discipleship development is a process that takes time to transform a believer into a maturing disciple and disciple maker for Christ. Erskine (2004) said, "Any definition of discipleship must involve a process of helping individuals grow in their Christlikeness" (p. 29). Earley and Dempsey (2013) summarized this process as one that involves salvation, spiritual growth, serving, suffering, and fruit-bearing to the glory of God (p. 16). Barna (2001) said this two-fold process (of being and producing) takes time and involves teaching, modeling, exhorting, and encouraging believers who have abandoned their former lives to follow Christ (p.

25). Putman and Harrington (2013) agreed and observed how the disciples went through a "process of spiritual maturity" (p. 57). Respondents to Barna's (2001) nationwide survey of church leaders used these words to describe discipleship, "lifelong," "multifaceted," "interactive," and "process" (p. 109). Lastly, Erskine (2004) noted, "Discipleship is a process of transformation that begins at salvation and continues until glorification. The period between salvation and glorification is itself a lifelong process of being transformed into the likeness of Christ" (p. 48).

Lastly, effective disciple making is the responsibility of the church (in that it provides adequate teaching, training, equipping, and opportunity, etc.) *and* the believer. Erskine (2004) said, "Intentionality on the part of the church, as well as the individual Christian, is necessary if life transformation is to occur" (p. 64). Similarly, Porter (2019) noted, "All Christians, whether they recognize it or not, are in an ongoing process of discipleship to their master, the Lord Jesus" (p. 79). Porter argued that the will, the heart, and the willingness of the spirit of every believer determine their true commitment to becoming a disciple of Christ. True transformation cannot occur without this level of commitment to the lifestyle of becoming a disciple of Christ. Subsequently, without this aspect of discipleship, the believer is out of position to become an effective disciple maker for Christ.

A biblical analysis of Jesus' ministry demonstrated that this bilateral dynamic embedded within the discipleship process is founded upon the relationship between master/teacher and disciple/student. Indeed, Ogden (2010) noted, "Discipleship is not a program, but a relationship" (p. 17). As such, there are at least two parties involved (albeit three with the guidance of the Holy Spirit), the church and the believer.

These three critical pillars further support the notion that God always provides a blueprint or methodology for His children to employ. Porter (2019) suggested, "In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that there are effectual and ineffectual ways of approaching life in his Father's kingdom" (p. 80). He continues to argue this point by saying:

> The Lord's Prayer shows that Jesus was keen on correcting false methods of approaching the kingdom of God to help his disciples come to a more or less accurate understanding of the actual nature of life in the kingdom so that they would be able to engage that kingdom reality as it actually is. (p 81)

Scriptural references to John 5:30 and 6:38 both cite Jesus' dependence on the Father's wisdom and guidance, where He says that the Son can do nothing of His own but only what He hears from the Father (paraphrasing). Porter (2019) agreed that believers need a level of divine wisdom and understanding to be effective in God's kingdom. He concluded his thoughts on the matter when he said "Even if we guess at what should be done or someone directs us as to what to do, without understanding, our efforts are devoid of meaningful intentionality" (p. 81).

Putman & Harrington's SCMD Discipleship Methodology

Several researchers have used their research and personal experiences to create a list of effective methods for discipleship development in various church models. Putman and Harrington (2013) prescribed four discipleship implementation strategies (or methods) for ministry leaders. Putman and Harrington (2013) stated that Jesus' method or strategy for making disciples and subsequently the method employed by the apostles in the New Testament church-centered around a simple blueprint. They have coined this as the Share, Connect, Minister, and Disciple (SCMD) methodology (p. 153). They noted:

> Jesus *shared* who he was through words and deeds. When people accepted His message, He invited them to *connect* with Him in relationship. During that time of sharing life together, He taught them the truth about himself. As these disciples grew, Jesus trained them to *minister* to the lost and to his other follower. Finally, after Jesus rose from the dead, He deployed his followers to *disciple* others. (p. 153)

This model might seem simple on the surface, but it has many layers embedded within it that include the previously mentioned five stages of discipleship. These five stages are described as being (1) dead to Christ, (2) an infant in Christ, (3) a child growing in Christ, (4) a young adult, and (5) a parent. These stages are all interwoven into the four-step model making for one comprehensive plan to mature believers into disciple makers of Christ (p. 154).

The first step, the Share step, begins with someone sharing Christ with a nonbeliever who is spiritually dead in Christ, and that person hearing and accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Putman and Harrington (2013) stated, "We emulate the incarnation of Jesus as we enter into the lost and hurting world, and then, in the process, we give an invitation for people to respond to Jesus through us" (p. 155). They are born-again after accepting this invitation and now become infants in Christ who "need to connect with spiritual parents for discipleship" (p. 158).

As progress continues, this new infant in Christ begins to "connect with others, growing in Christ, and learning how to consecrate themselves unto God" (Putman & Harrington, 2013, p. 158). In this second step, growing believers are like toddlers or elementary-age children whose connection to the community is critical to their continued success and journey towards spiritual maturity. The relational components of discipleship development are top of mind here and serve as the primary driving force that facilitates growth. These children make connections to God's Word, His purpose for their lives and connect with other believers in a community (Putman & Harrington, 2013). The goal of this step is for the Holy Spirit to do a deep internal work where the focus on one's life shifts from a narrow, self-centric view to that of a larger kingdom view.

Throughout the third step, the Minister-step, in Putman and Harrington's (2013) SCMD model, evidence of spiritual growth and transformation surfaces. As a young adult (the fourth stage), disciples receive additional training and opportunities to minister to others. They

summarize this third step as the demonstration, delegation, and supervision process. Here, the disciples imitate Jesus as they model how to minister to others, assign specific ministry tasks to them, and hold them accountable for their actions and ongoing growth (p. 160).

Supervision is critical in this step because it provides valuable feedback and insight for the learning and growing disciple. Much like Jesus' teaching of the disciples on why they could not cast out the demon from the little boy in Matthew 17:14-21, supervision provides context and highlights areas of improvement for those growing in ministry. Putman and Harrington (2013) said, "Many churches push the right emphasis of serving, but the serving is never supervised. Disciple making churches, not only model service, teach it, and involve people in it, they also provide ongoing supervision to help people become a practically effective minister" (p. 162).

Lastly, in the fourth, Disciple Making step, mature disciples are regarded as parents (fifth stage) and are released to make other disciples. In other words, they are now reproducing Christ in others. Similar to the natural roles of parents, these disciple makers are released with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to bear fruit. A sign of this final step in the SCMD model is when "mature disciples are making disciples, they are making disciples who have gone on to be disciple makers themselves" (p. 164).

The behaviors at this stage are intentional and strategic as mature disciples have come to understand God's love for them and others. Their focus then is to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them as they lead others to reproduce-and this then elevates to the multiplication of Jesus' model of discipleship. "Jesus instilled a vision for multiplication in his disciples. He painted a picture of the kingdom as a place of growth and multiplication, and He dreamed with them about their role in the harvest to come" (Putman and Harrington, 2013, p. 163). This dream is realized here in this final step of the SCMD discipleship model.

While the four steps to this process are simple enough and easy to recall, it is the inner workings of the five stages of discipleship that play an important role in facilitating effective disciple making here. For this model to work, leaders must fully understand the congruency of this model (the four steps in conjunction with the five stages) and know how to articulate and navigate through them seamlessly so as not to complicate and frustrate their teams employing this model.

Byrd's Narrative Discipleship Methodology

Byrd (2011) sought to understand how emerging adults (aged between 18 through 30) grew their faith. His work sought to understand how narrative discipleship helped these emerging adults "identify themes in their journey of faith in order to establish a foundation for transformative learning to occur" (p.246). He hoped that these research methods would "prove useful in providing an effective method of discipleship" (Byrd, 2011, p. 246).

Byrd stated that "the use of outdated methods to disciple young adults at best falls short of meeting their needs and may even drive away those in critical periods of life" (p. 247). He explored the concept of narrative discipleship as a better model for engaging and growing young, emerging adults. As his article title suggests, the underlying premise was to connect the dots between various life experiences with God's Word in a storytelling fashion. "As the main characters in the stories of our lives, Christians are active co-authors with God instead of passive characters on an unchangeable printed page" (Byrd, 2011, p. 247). As a result, Byrd stated:

> Narrative discipleship uses methods and techniques of qualitative narrative research and analysis to elicit personal experiences and stores. Once stories are voiced, the discipler then guides the disciple in analyzing and interpreting his or her own stories in light of present conditions and experiences, the faith community, and the biblical narrative. (p. 248)

Byrd (2011) identified three primary influences shaping this approach to discipleship: narrative identity, adult learning, and transformative learning, synthesizing elements of Christian education, education psychology, and general discipleship tenets (p. 248). While it is unclear if having a biblical worldview lies at the foundation of this approach, the theories Byrd relied on for this model appeared to be influenced by "contemporary" Christian thought.

On a fundamental level, narrative identity theory reminds one of the traditional church testimonies shared among members as a means of encouragement, support, and exhortation to hold fast to the profession of one's faith (Hebrews 10:23). Here, "what people find meaningful in their lives is made real, expressed, and remembered through stories, metaphors, narratives, and autobiographies" (Byrd, 2011, p. 249).

According to Byrd (2011), traditional churches' one-sided knowledge dispensary method is ineffective. The church must look to leverage research from within the educational and psychological fields of study to better understand how adults learn. This premise is a key pillar of the narrative discipleship model Byrd proposes. Referencing Christian educators, Byrd stated:

> It is no longer enough for educators to focus on the religious subject matter; but they should also help developing Christians to construct mature adult identities that incorporate faith into all of life. This theory could be attractive to contemporary Christian educators who value the discipler's experiences and knowledge while seeking to teach specific doctrines and traditional spiritual disciplines and practices. (p. 250)

The process of learning and interpreting biblical doctrine is combined with the disciple's ability to share their experiences and identify emerging themes in their life in accordance with God's Word. This model touches on Yount's (2010) Discipler's model, which also incorporates elements of educational psychology to create space for effective and transformational learning and spiritual growth. Yount's model (discussed below) accounts for the human side of the

growing disciple, making room for a balance between the doctrinal truths of the Bible with the physical, emotional, and social needs of the believer.

While Byrd's (2011) model has some promising elements, this researcher could not find additional literature to speak to this method of discipling others. Additionally, in the absence of more substantive material to review regarding this model, one is left wondering about its structure or setting and potential effectiveness with other audiences of younger children or those outside of Byrd's 18-30 age range. However, the narrative approach may be articulated in various ways and combined with other discipleship elements (i.e., the small group) to increase its effectiveness.

Yount's Discipler's Model

Yount (2010) opened the first chapter of his book, *Created to Learn*, quoting Ephesians 4:12-16, emphasizing the equipping of the saints' language. His experiences drew on ministerial training and educational psychology and years of teaching Sunday school as he sought to help others grow in the Lord. In reflection on these experiences, he created his own model of effective discipleship development.

This model, which appeals to the master/teacher element of a discipler, uses the visual of stones and pillars to shape a house encased in a circle to highlight key aspects of development. This model outlined:

- The Left Foundation Stone: The Bible
- The Right Foundation Stone: The Needs of People
- The Left Pillar: Helping People Think
- The Right Pillar: Helping People Value
- The Center Pillar: Helping People Relate
- The Capstone: Helping People Grow
- The Circle: Holy Spirit as Discipler

As indicated above, each element is designed to equip one aspect of the individual in spirit, soul, and body. The Bible serves as the key foundational stone and guides all doctrinal truth to convey God's purpose and will for all believers. In conjunction, and on the same level as the Bible was the right foundation stone designed to meet people's needs. Here, Yount (2010) referenced Jesus' efforts to meet individuals' personal (physical, emotional, psycho-social) needs before aspiring to their spiritual needs and deficiencies. "He met needs in the lives of the people, the leper, the lame, the deaf, the blind, the lonely and the religious-and in doing so, taught us in tangible ways how much the Father loves us" (Yount, 2010, p. 9).

The left pillar speaks to the cognitive (thinking) aspect of transformational learning that leads to spiritual growth as believers learn how to read and understand biblical passages and doctrinal truths. Here, believers grow in the knowledge that "goes beyond" basic information. The goal here is for *epignosis* to occur, for head knowledge to transition into a realm of spiritual understanding rooted in the heart that leads to the practical application of God's Word.

The right pillar speaks to the affective or humanistic side of individuals, facilitating healthy emotional growth and balance in life. It challenges growing believers to confront emotional issues in their lives, keeping them from walking in the fullness of God. These emotional pitfalls (unforgiveness, jealousy, anger, bitterness) hinder true growth and spiritual maturity. Striking a balance between these two stones is key for all leaders, and Yount (2010) warns against leaning too heavily on one side over the other. This imbalance will either cause the learning and growing atmosphere to be stale and cold (leaning too heavily on knowledge dissemination) or too superficial-relying too heavily on the experiences and stories of growing believers (p. 18).

On the other hand, the center pillar guides people outside of themselves and facilitates growth in the community as they relate to one another. Believers and growing disciples are called to be in relationship with God and others (Matt 22:37-39). Consequently, effective disciples love God and love others, helping each other to grow into the fullness of the measure of Christ. Relationship and genuine fellowship or *koinonia* are crucial here. Yount (2010) noted, "spiritual unity develops in believers as they gather in small groups to study the Bible, to share with each other, to affirm each other, and to minister growth to one another" (p. 21).

For Yount (2010), the stones and pillars converge into the capstone of growth aided by the work of the Holy Spirit (the circle). The Great Commission of disciples making disciples for Christ is not possible without the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Notably, while Yount coins his model as the "Discipler's Model" with a focus on transformational learning and spiritual growth of believers, his foundational scripture lies not with the Great Commission but with Ephesians 4:12-16. However, the latter does speak to the spiritual development of believers, of their equipping and preparation for ministry. Nevertheless, it is connected in many ways to the Great Commission, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

Earley and Dempsey's Win, Grow and Send Methodology

Earley and Dempsey's (2013) method of winning, growing, and sending encompass all of the abovementioned themes. It speaks to growing in community, building relationships, the disciple's spiritual growth and development, and the commitment of the church to help facilitate the process of disciples becoming and making disciples for Christ.

Essential to their model were the requirements for discipleship, articulated as the three stages of development-the believer, disciple, and disciple maker stages. Each stage incorporated elements seen in Putman and Harrington's (2013) model referenced above but was less cumbersome. However, unlike Putman and Harrington, there does not appear to be an overlap, but rather a tiered approach where before believers matriculate to the official disciple maker's model, they must first complete the requirements of the three discipleship development stages.

Earley and Dempsey's (2013) three stages of development begin with the believer declaring their love for Christ and accepting Him as their Savior. It is a process that includes some investigative work as the individual comes to know who the Son of God is and His love for mankind. It results in the individual's salvation, with them confessing Christ as their Savior (p. 128).

The second stage of discipleship development in their model involved the development of the believer into a disciple. Here the believer is trained to understand the cost of discipleship, following Christ in total obedience, and loving Him as He transforms them into His character. According to Earley and Dempsey's (2013) model, the final stage in the discipleship development requirements was the disciple maker stage. In this stage, the disciple is now deployed and sent out to do the work of the ministry. As a disciple maker, the new leader is poised to fulfill the Great Commission, to reproduce and multiply with passion and intentionality (p. 128).

After matriculating through these requirements, the individual transitions from believer to disciple and from disciple-to-disciple maker. The disciple maker's goal is to win, grow, and send. This is what Earley and Dempsey (2013) called their "Disciple-Making Strategy of Jesus" (p. 129). Each of its three phases meets one of the commands found in the Great Commission-

evangelize, disciple, and teach. The authors state that "in stage one disciple makers help seekers become believers, in stage two they help believers become disciples, and in the final third stage the discipler helps disciples become disciple makers" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 129).

It is important to note that the new discipler is now imitating Christ as they pray for the lost, invest in and build a healthy relationship with them, and inspires them to grow in their walk with God. Additionally, they are "providing opportunities for them to demonstrate what they have learned and involving them in on the job training" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 129).

Earley and Dempsey's (2013) findings also underscore the need for the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit through each of the prerequisite stages and the "official" disciple making strategy. It also acknowledges the critical nature relationships and community has throughout the process of development. The researchers noted that to effectively train and send disciple makers out to make more disciple makers, the discipler must employ "the Word of God, relationships, small groups (community aspect), missional living, and spiritual disciples or other aids" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 166).

Spiritual Formation in Community

Theories surrounding discipleship in relation to the level of spiritual formation that occurs in community persist in the works of Lowe and Lowe (2018), Howard (2018), Beagles (2012), and Pettit (2008). They emphasize that true, effective discipleship cannot occur outside of the community. Drawing on many relational aspects of spiritual growth, they all in some form or fashion cite words like "family, spiritual ecosystem, community, environmental or relational discipleship" to denote the significance of individuals growing in Christ with others.

Pettit (2008) stated, "spiritual formation requires a both/and approach that involves the Spirit of God's activity and the believer's activity," with "individuals created to function in

community according to Romans 12:4-5" (p. 47). The premise of the book *Foundations of Spiritual Formation* was that as believers, "we live in the already and await the not yet," in the sense that we are in a continual process of development with each other until the second coming of Christ (Petit, 2008, p. 49). Until that time, we are constantly being conformed to His character and life through worship, learning of God's Word in wise counsel with others, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit through love, life stories, and collaboration with the church at large.

Lowe and Lowe's (2018) theory hinged on the concept that God had an original design for community, beginning with the Trinity and extending to creation. Furthermore, many of the Pauline letters with the Apostle's emphasis on *koinonia* (fellowship), *allelon* (one another), and the *syn* (togetherness) among believers were seen throughout the New Testament churches he established. As a result, their work transcends fellowship beyond the four walls of a physical building. They argued that effective spiritual growth and discipleship development could occur in a digital or online learning environment with the right spiritual ecosystem.

Beagles' (2012) work unpacked elements of spiritual formation through the lens of many New Testament scriptures like 1 Thessalonians 2:11, 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10, and 2:13-16, as well as through Ephesians 4:14-16 in an attempt to advocate for disciplers to embrace the fundamental tenets of growing disciples in community. Like many other researchers and practitioners, her work acknowledged discipleship development in relation to God and others. She proceeded to test her theory, the Growing Disciples in Community Model, with this critical age group. The result of her study supports other empirical data that demonstrate the power, impact, and significance of believers growing together. Her results confirmed the hypothesis that spiritual formation and discipleship was a process for both the individual and the corporate

church. The community to which believers ascribe has a significant influence on their ability to grow in personal discipleship with God, His Word, and others.

Development in community is a crucial methodology to understand, especially as it relates to multisite churches. These churches are defined as "churches with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p. 1). The unique structure of the multisite church design warrants high levels of connectivity among its members. Of importance to this model is how multisite church leaders foster a community that is not focused on default self-help groups, as some have reported (Walton, 2011). However, when communities are built on the true and divine nature they were created for, they can foster spiritual growth and development that leads to disciple making. While highlighting some benefits of the small groups to foster elements of discipleship growth in community, Walton (2011) also cautioned leaders against falling into cultural traps that diminish "broader kingdom values" over the needs of its members (p.99).

Related Literature

As previously mentioned, biblical and theological references and precedent literature consistently emphasize the need for effective discipleship methods. While the above spoke to various methodologies that catalyze spiritual growth and development, the setting in which these discipleship methods occur must also be evaluated. Within the literature, the small group presents itself as a recurring viable setting where discipleship and disciple making can occur.

The concept, however, is not new, with roots in the New Testament at the onset of the apostles' ministry as they sought to fulfill the Great Commission. Today, the term small group has also been used synonymously with cell groups, community groups, and house churches (Erskine, 2014). The terms vary only by style, whether open versus closed or sermon-based

versus purpose-driven. Overall, however, they originated in the New Testament as a means by which believers gathered for intimate times of fellowship, to understand biblical truths, grow in Christ together, and make disciples in His name.

This portion of the literature review explored, in greater detail, the purpose of small groups, the advantages and disadvantages of their structure, and its intersection with the complex dynamics of the multisite church to understand how they are used to foster spiritual growth and discipleship development.

House Churches in the New Testament

There is a direct relationship between house churches and the growth of Christianity with the New Testament church and lessons learned from its purpose and structure can have an immeasurable impact on today's efforts to create disciples. Atkinson and Comiskey (2014) noted, "As the Christian movement spread, the house church dominated Christian assemblies, as no place met their needs save the homes of the members" (p. 76). They continued, "House churches played an essential role in the rapid growth and ultimate triumph of Christianity, and it would be safe to say that the first three centuries belonged to the house church movement" (p. 76).

This growth played a significant role in developing early believers who grew to become mature disciples of Christ through this model. Atkinson and Comiskey (2014) recalled that "house-based ministry became so common that throughout the book of Acts, every mention of a local church or a church meeting, whether for worship or fellowship, is a reference to a church meeting in a home" (p. 76). In fact, Bill Search (2008) agreed "small groups as we know them are not a new phenomenon" and that "in the first few hundred years of the church they were not

optional but were the primary way to experience the church until Christianity was legalized in AD 313" (p. 19).

Throughout the New Testament, one observes several instances where the early apostles taught, baptized, prayed, and fellowshipped with newly converted believers in these intimate house settings. From Peter in Acts 12 to Lydia in Acts 16 to Aquila and Priscilla in 1 Corinthians 16, house churches were the primary means for new believers to interact with one another and learn of God. Indeed, Atkinson and Comiskey (2014) cite multiple examples from the Apostle Paul's ministry of the magnitude and impact of house churches, citing that "all of the New Testament churches that are mentioned in his letters as having specific locations were in private homes" (p. 77). Historical accounts attest to this fact as "towns such as Jerusalem, Rome, or Ephesus might have had thousands of Christians, but each church would be made up of 10 to 30 people who met in homes" (Search, 2008, p. 28).

These "house groups or churches" were indeed small, with no more than 20 attendees considering the average size of first century houses and were "simply normal-sized house structures" (Atkinson & Comiskey, 2014, p. 78). Interestingly enough, they also cautioned against putting too much emphasis on the size or shape of the group, which may bear weight in considering the modern structure of small groups within multisite churches.

The aesthetics of the house were irrelevant in relation to the intention of the homeowner to use specific spaces within the house for instruction and spiritual enrichment of believers. Believers mostly met in the dining room, courtyard, or garden areas for "teaching, preaching, baptisms, or other instructional activities. Similar in fashion to many multisite church models, and as the house church members grew, another home was founded in another location" (Atkinson & Comiskey, 2014, pp. 78-79). Architectural design and the preservation of intimate

fellowship was behind the expansion. Adhering to both allowed for "more personally focused experience of catechesis and discipleship" (p. 80).

According to scripture (Acts 2:42, 46-47, and 5:42) and observation of the Pauline letters, believers engaged in a range of activities in these facilities. These house churches did not adhere to a formal program or cadence of activities in a particular order or style that most modern believers experience in modern-day churches. The gatherings were quite flexible and also included praying, singing, exhorting, and comforting the believers. "The members enjoyed each other's presence, laughed together, and experienced rich fellowship. Meetings were informal, joyful and social, and were reflective of familial relationships" (Atkinson & Comiskey, 2014, p. 81). Search (2008) confirmed that these early house gatherings encompassed a "relational, growth, and missional pattern where believers gathered together in homes, sharing meals, learned about Jesus and increased [in number]" (p. 25). It was these descriptions of community, support, and growth among members that fostered the spread of the gospel message.

A major component in the development of disciples centered around their relationship with God and other believers. Atkinson and Comiskey (2014) noted that, "the phrase 'one another' appears more than 50 times in the New Testament" (p. 81). Likewise, Lowe and Lowe (2018) expounded upon the vertical and horizontal nature of the *syn*-compound that "focuses exclusively on interpersonal relationships with Christ *and* other Christians, occurring between 54 and 56 times" throughout Paul's epistles (p. 151).

The Apostle Paul referenced this *syn*-compound even during correction or rebuke with emerging internal conflicts in the growing churches. Lowe and Lowe (2018) noted this relationship "to reflect different aspects of a more general theme of connectedness instigated by a

combination of internal and external factors that threatened the cohesion of the community" so the believers could "stand firm for the gospel and to be united in Christian love" (p. 152).

With the "one another" language seen throughout the Pauline letters, Paul emphasized the need to grow together in love towards spiritual maturity- something seen repeatedly in his communication to these house churches. As such, house churches continued as a method that united believers across a myriad of activities designed to foster increased attention to the holy sacraments, spiritual disciplines, and discipleship development.

Atkinson and Comiskey (2014) stated:

Luke describes homes being used for prayer meetings (Acts 12:12); for an evening of Christian fellowship (Acts 21:7); for holy communion services (Acts 2:46); for a whole night of prayer, worship, and instruction (Acts 20:7), for impromptu evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32); for planned meetings to hear the gospel (Acts 10:22); for following up (Acts 18:26), and for organized instruction (Acts 5:42). (p. 81)

The value and impact of the purpose and structure of house churches in the New Testament are seen in the number of believers that were added to the church. Aside from a brief period in history where the communal aspect of house churches took a back seat to the side effects of the formal legalization of Christianity, glimpses of the small group ministry can be observed in Martin Luther's teachings and that of John Wesley in the 1500 and 1700s respectively (Search, 2008, pp. 28-29).

Over these years, and more prominently with Wesley's work, groups "were created to help people connect and change. His groups offered community but demanded high commitment and accountability, and eventually grew to such an extent they were seen across North America and the United Kingdom in large numbers" (Search, 2008, p.29). From this summary alone, the growth and development of disciples are at the forefront. This core purpose should not change

when considering modern structures and purposes of the small group ministry, even within the multisite church.

Advantages & Disadvantages of the 21st Century Small Group

Today, there are numerous styles to choose from concerning the small group. *Christianity Today* listed 10 different types of small group designs from open, closed, free-market, neighborhood, purpose-driven, sermon-based, organic, and host groups on their small group website page. The page provides insight and direction on all things related to the small group ministry. Also, it provides readers with a few examples of churches that employ the method, a brief description of the method, and the advantages and disadvantages of each style.

Open small groups were described as "those that are always open to receive new members and are more prone to outreach and evangelism" (*Christianity Today,* 2020, p. 1). Closed groups, on the other hand, were relatively exclusive to a set number of members to preserve "intimacy, trust, and accountability among group members, and may only meet for a designed period of time" (p. 2). The online magazine also mentions sermon-based small groups, which Harless (2012) prescribed as the most transformative method for discipleship development. The organization described this style as a small group that "links the ministry with the weekly sermon and worship service where group members study the same topic or passage of scripture that was covered in the sermon" (*Christianity Today*, 2020, p. 7).

Neighborhood groups are designed for people to connect and grow who live near each other, and free-market groups are flexible, allowing the group leader to determine the course of study. The latter, according to the magazine, is used to establish groups around "certain hobbies or topics" (Christianity Today, 2020, p. 4). Cell groups are another style listed on the site. They reflect a biological nature in that they are comprised of "DNA of a cell that includes worship,

edification, relational evangelism, and discipleship, growing and multiplying this DNA to each new group" (Christianity Today, 2020, p. 3).

Notably, each of the above styles, in some way, promotes biblical instruction, worship, fellowship, outreach, trust, accountability, and discipleship development. Similar to the organic or host small group, others are more likely to have increased cultural influences that resemble post-modern relativism with its fluidity and preference of individual needs versus kingdom advancement.

Christianity Today (2020) and Donahue and Gowler (2014) highlighted the advantages of the small group ministry. They suggested that small groups were linked to believers both becoming disciples and being disciples of Christ, including worship, discipleship, evangelism, community, spiritual maturity, accountability, and deeper, intimate opportunities to study the Word in an intergenerational setting.

Rynsburger and Lamport (2008) also suggested that another advantage of small groups occurs when group leaders are trained to facilitate inductive learning of biblical passages and text. They said learning occurs through this method that "helps deter out-of-context interpretations and ideas imported into the text" (p. 115). Harless (2012) guided believers through a series of steps to unpack the scriptures and envision how biblical principles can be applied to daily life in a Socratic manner. This was one of the benefits of these intimate settings, especially with the aid of the Holy Spirit, the One who teaches believers all things (John 14:26).

Robert Wuthnow's early research on the effectiveness of small groups revealed that "90% of survey respondents felt closer to God, 87% developed a deeper love towards others, and 84% stated that they experienced the Bible becoming more meaningful to them" (Donahue & Gowler, 2014, p. 123). Furthermore, "75% felt encouraged enough to share their faith, 72%

worked to help a needy person outside the group, and 42% increased their involvement in community volunteer work" (p. 124). Other researchers like Walton (2011) yielded similar results, with study participants expressing increased connectedness to God and others, growing in their faith, and increased devotion to prayer and reading of the scriptures (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Jackson's (2019) research suggested that involvement in small church groups can also lead to increased generosity of time and resources for attendees-a potential measurement of spiritual growth reflective of the sacrificial component of being a disciple.

Search (2008) stated that in his years of experience participating, leading, and developing the small group ministry, there were "three simple patterns that lead to a healthy small group: connecting, changing, and cultivating" (p. 16). In many ways, these pillars seem to align with the thoughts and research findings cited above, as participating members developed relationships with others that deem some to reference their small group as family. Similarly, as members continue their involvement in the group, they are challenged to become more like Christ (Search, 2008) and grow to have the heart to help others do the same.

These are all major milestones to accomplish in the life of believers, especially the estimated 72 million adults participating in a church-based small group at the time of Wuthnow's survey (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). This data is encouraging when considering the two great commands to love God and love your neighbor. However, there were concerns that it was not enough to demonstrate the ultimate goal of the Great Commission to make disciples who produce disciples of Christ.

Wuthnow's work concluded that "church-based small groups appeared to be more effective at reaching those who were already attending church rather than those who were just beginning to attend" (Donahue & Gowler, 2014, p. 124). The self-serving nature of the groups,

while on the one hand, helped individuals mature spiritually, fell short of reaching its intended

purpose of reaching the lost and teaching them about Christ.

Additional drawbacks or disadvantages of the small group ministry included the tendency

for some groups to become self-help groups (Walton, 2011). Additionally, small groups had the

tendency to develop cliques, create gossipmongers, and become more inward-focused rather than

adhere to the broader kingdom-focused evangelism. The purpose of the small groups is to reach

the lost and help others come into the knowledge and love of Christ (Walton, 2011). This is

especially true for those small groups who employ the host group or organic group style that

often originated as a rebellion against the more structured model of spiritual community

(*Christianity Today,* 2020).

Lastly, perhaps another disadvantage of the small group concept lies in the core values

that define the Western world as more individualistic than Eastern societies, where community

and family are an essential part of daily life. In the latter, small group ministries were thriving in

community, whereas those in Europe and America continue to struggle. Search (2008) noted:

> Some have suggested that in the West, technology, the fast pace of life, and focus on consuming material goods has squelched community. Certainly, Asia, Africa and the rest of the developing world have issues, but a deep need for a community strategy isn't one of them. (p. 30)

Multisite Churches

Frye (2011) stated that Elmer Towns was the first to define a multisite church, citing it as

"one church that meets in multiple locations" (p. 2). A more comprehensive definition followed

as Towns continued his research into the phenomenon. He said a multisite church was:

> An extended geographic parish church spread out over a large area so that it: 1) meets in several locations, 2) operates different ministries in different locations, and has expanded its location geographically in order to reach a larger Jerusalem. Another way of describing this concept is: 1) multiple ministries, 2) multiple places of ministry, 3) multiple ministers, but 4) one central organization and one senior pastor. (p.2)

Others like Bill Easum and Dave Travis defined multisite churches as one that "meets in many locations but has the same core values, mission, administration, budget, treasury, and staff as a single site church" (Frye, 2011, p. 3). Still others like Edwards (2016) define multisite churches as those with "multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (p. 1). Edwards continued that "in some multisite contexts, the emphasis is unapologetically placed upon the clear duplication of the DNA of the main campus" (p. 61).

By contrast, the *Leadership Network / Generis Multisite Church Scorecard* produced by Warren Bird (2014) defined a megachurch as "one congregation that draws 2,000 or more adults and children on a typical weekend" in a single geographic location (p. 8). His research suggested that the megachurch served as the forerunner of the multisite church.

His groundbreaking report also provided insight on the transition to multisite church status, citing that most churches go multisite when their membership reaches about 1,000 in size. The report also confirmed that "the larger the church, the more likely it is to be multisite," and that "the larger the church, the more campuses and services it has," (Bird, 2014, pp. 8-9). With an average growth rate of 14% per year, Bird (2014) noted, "Multisite churches grow faster, have more lay participation and reach more new believers than single-site churches" (p. 3).

Multisite Church Characteristics

According to the literature, multisite churches come in all different sizes and shapes, and they offer varying ways to worship, hear the Word of God, volunteer, and connect with other believers. Bird (2014) reported:

> Almost all (82%) multisite campuses have a paid campus pastor whose role is to ensure people at that site are pastored, discipled, and trained, devoting at least 75% of their time to that location. This number increases to 92% for churches with 5,000 or more in total attendance. (p. 12)

Bird (2014) added that before launching a new site, the campus pastor, worship leader, and

children's leadership roles are all designated as hired positions for the newly anticipated site

(pp.12-13).

Multisite campuses are also expected to become financially sustainable-where they are no

longer dependent on the parent or main church. However, Bird (2014) admitted that his research

did not identify any concrete threshold for when this happens, implying that this expectation

varied from ministry to campus. A benefit to each campus was the sharing of resources between

campuses. Bird's (2014) report demonstrated the sharing of resources across 20 different

categories. He indicated:

> 94% human resources (defined as staffing, salaries, benefits, staff guidelines, information services, and information technology, 93% accounting (contributions, payables, donor management, etc.), 90% communications branding (banners, themes, etc.), 89% communications website, 82% communications marketing, 79% communications bulletins, 78% long-distance missions, 74% most preaching/teaching, 71% communications social media, 62% worship arts (stage, graphics, props, video, PowerPoint, etc.), 59% leadership development, 52% small group management, 48% program development, 44% new member orientation/assimilation, 43% youth ministries, 43% children's ministries, and 41% local missions. (p. 15)

For Edwards (2016), it was the complexity of these leadership structures that encouraged

his research. Below is a summary of the nine different leadership structures found within

multisite churches. They included:

> (1) One senior pastor with an executive team who oversees different campus pastors/sites, (2) one senior pastor who directly oversees multiple campus pastors, (3) one senior pastor who oversees one executive pastor who oversees the global central staff, who then in turn oversee the campus pastors, (4 and 5) governing board that includes the senior pastor, who oversees a senior or executive team, who then in turn oversees the campus pastors, (6) a senior or executive leadership team that oversees campus pastors and a global/central staff person, (7) a council of elders that "empower" a central elder team that includes campus pastors, who then oversee local campus elders, (8) a senior or executive leadership team that includes campus pastors who oversee campus pastors who are called local elders (terminology difference here), and (9) a congregation that oversees a board of trustee deacons who oversees the senior pastor who oversees the executive pastor who then provide leadership for campus pastors and key staff. (pp. 132-144)

Concerning the delivery of services, multisite churches vary from video-streaming of live Bible preaching and teaching to live-only preaching and teaching, to a hybrid of both, per the occasion.

Of particular interest to this research project was how spiritual growth and discipleship occurred across campuses within the multisite church model. Bird's (2014) report-the largest to date, represented 535 churches, 12 countries, and 1.8 million weekly worship attendees. The report revealed that "spiritual growth and volunteering were of utmost importance" (p. 26). His report revealed that 88% of multisite churches experienced increased lay participation (p.11), while "newer campuses were strongest in growing people spiritually and inviting friends to the ministry" (p. 27). However, it was interesting to learn that connecting people to small groups (as a vehicle for discipleship development) was ranked sixth on the list of the most challenging issues facing multisite church leaders (p.22). Only 24% of internet-based campuses (those individuals who ascribe to a particular multisite church via the internet versus a physical campus) sought to connect via a small group outside of worship experiences (p.20).

This finding can have multiple interpretations subject to each individual reader, as the report does not provide any additional information on the use or purpose of the small group ministry. One might interpret this as the small group ministry is strong and thriving. However, if this were the case, it would seem likely that the data supporting this would have been highlighted throughout the report, and in greater detail, much like the report does with lay participation data points. Another interpretation could be the opposite; there was little to no attention given to the effective development of the small group ministry as a whole, and if the latter, then one is left wondering how multisite churches facilitate spiritual growth and discipleship development.

Unfortunately, the existing literature was evasive in describing how multisite churches facilitate spiritual growth and discipleship, be it through the small group ministry or other methods. A brief review of the literature demonstrated that possible spiritual growth measures included church attendance, participation in worship services, volunteerism, and giving.

Rationale for Study & Gaps in Literature

Perhaps the verdict is still out on whether or not multisite churches are a trendy fad, a movement, or the "new normal" (Stetzer, 2014) in Christian conversations, with equal proponents for or against each category. While researchers are zeroing in on specific facets of the multisite church model, one area that remains anemic is the multisite church's commitment to discipleship development through small groups.

A simple Google search for "multisite churches" populated some 189,000 results with topics that range from identifying trends or themes within the church structure, multisite church best practices, and problems with multisite churches, to insight regarding the current, estimated number of multisite churches in America. A better and perhaps higher-quality academic search using Liberty University's online library system yielded 2,410 results that included eBooks, dissertations, and journal articles. Google Scholar's search yielded some 18,000 records that also highlighted the video and technology aspects of the model.

Surprisingly, however, none of the titles from the first two to three pages of each search connected multisite churches with discipleship or the small group ministry. While some articles, books, and website references included "membership" in their respective titles, the descriptions associated with such titles sought to examine how to build and sustain memberships within multisite churches. Only one article from Google Scholar spoke directly to multisite churches and small groups as a vehicle for effective discipleship development-Jones' (2008) research on

how to use the ministry to aid the transitional multisite church. It was disheartening to know that something that has taken the American church by proverbial storm did not yield any substantive results on the model's commitment to fulfilling the Great Commission.

The small group ministry is undoubtedly the most biblical method for making disciples in the local church (Yates, 2012, p.18). The model's effectiveness has persisted throughout the early church's history, down through modern history, and continues to make its mark on today's congregations. Jackson (2019) stated that "in the modern American church, small group ministries are often seen as the church's primary disciple-making engine and that these disciple-making efforts have resulted in an increase in small group participation over the last 30 years" (p. 87). Yates (2012) acknowledged that the growth of the house church movement was not restricted to political tensions and persecutions but by the provocation of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, where in Acts 2, over 3,000 members were added to the church. There was a shift from "addition to multiplication" (Yates, 2012, p. 12).

Multisite church growth has followed a similar trend in handling the thousands of members on their roster. For example, New Testament homes were not architecturally designed to hold large groups; therefore, new house churches started to grow (Atkinson & Comiskey, 2014, p. 79). Today multisite churches create satellite campuses in various geographies to accommodate the growing number of interested new members.

In his groundbreaking work, Frye (2011) provided a comprehensive look at the exponential growth of the multisite church movement from 1950 to 2010. While he realized that there was no definitive time in history to mark the genesis of the multisite church concept, he confirmed that the movement has been on the rise since the 1990 (p.17). Frye (2011) stated, "An

increasing number of churches began to explore the multisite concept-the idea of becoming one church that meets in multiple locations" (p. 14).

What began in the "mid-twentieth century as a confluence of several social developments; namely from a growing urban mindset and consumer approach to ministry" (Frye, 2011, p. 18) continues to blossom today. For example, Surratt et al. (2009) reported at the time of their book's publication that:

- On a typical Sunday in 2009, some five million people-almost 10 percent of Protestant worshippers-attend a multisite church in the United States or Canada.
- Leaders at some 45,000 churches are seriously considering adding a worship service at one or more new locations or campuses in the next two years, according to a 2008 random survey of Protestant pastors conducted by Lifeway Research.
- From 2006 through 2008, nearly 700 churches attended Leadership Network-sponsored conferences on how to become or improve as a multisite church. (p. 13)

These were alarming numbers in 2009, but they support the upward trajectory in the number of multisite churches that rose from an estimated 10 multisite churches in 1990, to 1,000 in 2003, and 1,500 in 2005 (Frye, 2011, p.18). Today, current estimates are in the 8,000 to 10,000 range (Rainer, 2019, p. 1).

The attraction and growth of multisite churches are "more than a passing trend," with leaders like Thom Rainer, CEO of Lifeway Christian Research, suggesting that the growth of this model will only "continue to accelerate in the American Church" (Frye, 2011, p. 10). The model, which some have categorized as a revolutionary way to connect people with Christ, continues to gain acceptance and advocates in Christian circles (p.11).

This project did not delve into the theological discussions about the model's validity, nor was it designed to provide a play-by-play of its historical evolution. This study dedicated space to understanding its significance and implications for the development of believers into Christ's disciples and, in turn, its ability to reproduce disciples for Christ.

The list of researchers and practitioners with similar interests in the multisite church phenomenon included Ferguson (1997), whose work evaluated multisite churches and their disciple making abilities and McConnell (2009), whose work assessed the multisite church's impact on the development of Christian leaders. Brenda (2012) examined corporate and personal discipleship among multisite campus pastors, and Campbell and DeLashmutt (2016) examined ecclesiology in online multisite worship settings.

In his opening statements, Ferguson (1997) suggested that the church re-evaluate the church model in light of an ever-changing and multicultural climate (p.ii). The goal and mandate of the Great Commission has not changed with the times, and it is God's inerrant Word that is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore regardless of socio-cultural shifts. Ferguson (1997) said, "the New Testament church was a church without walls and had an organizational structure for disciple making and nurture that did not limit its growth potential" (p. ii). Researchers like Frye (2011) and Edwards (2016) posited that the multisite church is very similar to its New Testament church predecessor; therefore, more research is needed to understand the multisite church's purpose and nature before examining it its ability to fulfill the Great Commission.

Purpose of the Multisite Church Model

The attractive nature of multisite churches is often connected to the model's ability to serve the multicultural, multigenerational, multi socioeconomic needs of its community members. Ferguson (1997) noted that it "allows for effective disciple making of all people" (p. 3). Similarly, Ferguson outlined five pragmatic reasons the multisite church has become so appealing to church members. Specifically, he stated the multisite church:

1. Offers the opportunity to reach a large number of people
2. Extends the DNA of the parent church as proven soil where growth can take place

3. Enhances greater effectiveness of planning, which is done in teams under the watchful eye of the senior pastor, which is significant for the geographically placed minister
4. Provides outreach opportunities within homogeneous groupings and returns them to the larger family to learn the lesson of the blessedness of worshipping with those of other ethnic backgrounds and/or socioeconomic status
5. Diminishes the struggle of starting a church by keeping it tied to the parent body indefinitely. (p. 4)

However, as with anything else in life, the vision and purpose of the multisite church's model must clearly be articulated by leaders to reach its full potential. Frye (2011) said, "The multisite church concept holds the potential to help churches more effectively reach their communities with the gospel and to become more focused on the multiplication of churches" (p. 19). This level of multiplication is akin to the church growth and spiritual reproduction seen in the New Testament. It has, within its power to "take into itself converts in a widening stream" (Frye, 2011, p. 19).

Literature reflects that spiritual reproduction was at the forefront of the multisite church movement in very vague and general terms. Indeed, "the multisite church's effort to intentionally engage more people with the gospel of Jesus Christ is referred to as one of the most important developments in contemporary approaches to establishing and expanding churches" (Ferguson, 1997, p. 4). Frye (2011) agreed, indicating that it was one of the main purposes of The Key Church Strategy of the late 1990s. He stated, "Single key churches sought to reach its neighboring community through developing a series of outpost congregations for the explicit purpose of reaching unreached or underserved niche populations in order to evangelize and congregationalize them" (Frye, 2011, p. 56).

Frye said these earlier models were a foreshadowing of what was to evolve into multisite churches seen in the last 20 years. What has now become the "normal" multisite church, according to Frye, was sparked by economic advancement, increased physical mobility, and

connectedness that could only occur in tandem with the immense technological advancements. The latter is especially critical as multisite members often engage in worship experiences over internet connections that permit the senior pastor to stream the message from a central location to each of the ministry's satellite campus sites. Yet, these blanket or global-type statements appear to affirm the purpose of the multisite church. It cannot be overstated that there is a gap in the literature that speaks to how the mission to reach those far from Christ and to teach, baptize, and disciple them is actually accomplished within the multisite church model.

Chapter Summary

What is directly missing from this conversation are the specific ways in which newly converted or growing believers mature in their walk with God into a position of becoming and being a disciple of God. Volunteerism, as noted throughout Bird's (2014) research, does not equal discipleship; neither does giving of one's time, and financial resources constitute discipleship.

The spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, fasting, and studying the Word of God in a community with one another, as seen in the early church and throughout the Pauline epistles, were simply not included in the multisite church conversation. As previously stated, these are the foundational pillars in which one can mature in their walk with God. According to Earley and Dempsey's (2013) "Win, Grow, Send" model, these disciplines and opportunities for growth serve as the prerequisite for becoming a disciple maker of Christ.

If the multisite church is here, and here to stay as Stetzer (2014) advocated, then a study that sought to understand how the multisite church engages its members and develops them to become disciple makers for Christ must be examined. In addition, since the small group ministry is now regarded as the premier model for discipleship development, it would be beneficial for

church leaders and researchers alike to examine how best to merge the two models for effective

disciple making in today's ever-evolving climate.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The call to discipleship and the use of the small group ministry, especially within the multisite church, was of particular interest in this study. Many researchers like Harless (2012), Atkinson and Comiskey (2014), and Walton (2014) have become strong proponents of the small group model as a means of discipleship development in a variety of church settings, including the multisite church model. In fact, according to Shelby (2011) and Frye (2011), the small group ministry model has become the premier way that multisite churches foster community and spiritual growth. This chapter outlines the specific research design, data collection, and data analysis methodologies used throughout the study to assess participants' perceptions of their spiritual journey of discipleship development through the small group ministry in their multisite church.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

Bird (2014), Stetzer (2014), and Banks (2014) stated that the multisite church is growing exponentially and is here to stay, with nearly 10,000 multisite churches in North America. The model has great potential to reach the masses and foster the community necessary for ongoing spiritual growth. However, it is not without challenges that threaten its impact and perceived success.

Aside from leadership and structural complexities, questions surround the church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission, developing mature believers who become disciple makers for Christ. Shelby (2011) and Frye (2011) suggested that the small group is the preferred mechanism used to foster such development within multisite churches. Many other researchers like Yates (2012) and Jackson (2019) examined the small group ministry's principles, guidelines, and

overall success as a means for effective discipleship development. Jackson (2019), Donahue and Gowler (2014), and Walton (2011) assessed the biblical and theological aspects of the small group ministry and proceeded to advocate for its effectiveness. From helping believers interpret and apply biblical passages, to fostering community and fellowship with others, to providing opportunities for participants to grow in their faith, the small group ministry comes highly recommended as a tool to facilitate discipleship development.

Nevertheless, literature surrounding the impact of the small group ministry within the growing multisite church setting is anemic at best. Most literature investigated the initial interest in the model (Frye, 2011), the theological and leadership aspects of the model (Edwards, 2016), ecclesiology in online multisite worship settings (Campbell & DeLashmutt, 2014), and the model's impact on Christian leaders (McConnell, 2009).

Very little literature exists that examined the uniqueness of the multisite church model concerning how it encourages discipleship development. The current research sought to understand the dynamic between discipleship development and believer perceptions of their spiritual growth and development through small group ministries within multisite churches. As a predominant method for discipleship development within multisite churches, it was critical to understand the small group design's effectiveness in maturing believers into disciples who make disciples of Christ.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples. This study examined the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. Within the current research, multisite churches were generally defined as those "churches with

multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA"

(Edwards, 2016, p. 1). The theory guiding this study is found within Earley and Dempsey's

(2013) *Disciple Making Is: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*,

which outlined the growth process from believer to disciple-to-disciple maker in a community of

faith.

Research Questions

RQ1. How did multisite church small group participants describe their perceptions of the purpose of the small group ministry?

RQ2. How did multisite church small group participants describe their comfort level in walking others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the small group ministry?

RQ3. What, if any collaboration, was there between the spiritual activities embedded in the design and structure of small group sessions and the perceptions of discipleship development among multisite church small group participants?

RG4. How did the combination of survey research and in-depth interviews provide a more comprehensive understanding of multisite church small group participants' desire to walk others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the small group ministry?

Research Design and Methodology

The current study was a mixed methods research design that leveraged the benefits of

both the quantitative and qualitative research methodologies to ascertain the feelings and

experiences of small group participants in a multisite church setting.

Edwards' (2016) research suggested that multisite churches are those with multiple

satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA. Researchers like

Bird (2014), Stetzer (2014), and Banks (2014) insisted that multisite churches were here to stay,

growing much faster than traditional one-site churches, at a rate of 14% per year. Bird's (2014)

Leadership Network / Generis Multisite Church Scorecard Report estimated over 8,000 multisite

churches spread throughout almost every state in America plus Washington D.C., Canada's nine

largest provinces, and several dozen other countries (p. 3). In light of this growing phenomenon, the use and assessment of small groups to develop disciples within multisite churches lie at the center of this study.

Ultimately, this researcher moved beyond the mere objective nature of theories and conceptual ideas surrounding small groups to understand the subjective "lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of these experiences" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). These lived small group participation experiences within multisite churches have the potential to speak to the nucleus and purpose of the multisite church. In contrast, abstract concepts and accepted rhetoric from studies do not consider the process of what the multisite church proposes as its purpose or mission. Engaging others, especially those that Seidman (2013) stated: "makes up the organization" are "those upon which the abstractions are built" (p. 9). Therefore, it was vital to understand small group participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to their journey towards discipleship development within their multisite church.

The duality of this mixed methods design positioned this researcher to leverage the advantage of gathering information from a large sample of the population for increased generalization found in quantitative methods with the in-depth analysis that accompanies qualitative interviews. This design allowed this researcher to build upon the quantitative survey with the qualitative interviews to further explain and elaborate on the survey results. Researchers like Hesse-Biber (2010) underscored the advantages of this method saying, "Mixed methods is a rich field for the combination of data because with this design words, pictures, and narrative can be used to add meaning to numbers" (p. 3). Combining both research methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and real-life experiences of small group participants in multisite church settings. This design was critical; Leavy (2017)

described mixed methods research as a research design most appropriate for "describing, explaining, or evaluating complex problems or issues" (p. 164).

Consequently, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used for this study. The first half of the study utilized descriptive quantitative research methods to focus on the "insubstantial phenomena-concepts, abilities, and other intangible entities that cannot be pinned down in terms of precise physical qualities" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016, p. 143). The second half of the study used in-depth qualitative interviews (IDI) to further explain the quantitative findings. While the larger survey sample size allowed this researcher to "quantify" the attitudes and behaviors of multisite church small group participants, the smaller, qualitative sample of study participants provided a more "informal, almost friendly-like chat" with participants (Leedy & Omrod, 2016, p. 263). This approach also assisted with further analysis of their experiences.

Survey research, one of many quantitative research methods, served the current study well. Leavy (2017) stated that surveys are one of the more common methods used, notably because of their ability to "collect a breadth of data from large samples and generalize to the larger population from which the sample was drawn" (p. 101). Additionally, because survey responses can be "analyzed statistically," they are recommended as a viable means to "ascertain individuals' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or their reporting of their experiences or behaviors" (Leavy, 2017, p. 101). In this way, surveys offer subjective material with which researchers can measure participant responses.

Similar to Lee's (2018) work, the second half of this study allowed for qualitative, semi-structured interviews that provided a collaboration of sorts between the researcher and participants as they "worked together to arrive at the heart of the matter" related to the phenomenon in the study (Leedy & Omrod, 2016, p. 255). The heart of qualitative research

speaks to "a deep understanding of what people are doing and thinking, and why" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 50). Specifically, Roller and Lavrakas (2015) stated that "an IDI approach provides a rich, nuanced understanding of the 'thinking' (i.e., motivation) that drives behavior and attitude formation or otherwise leads to other consequences of research interest" (p. 51). They stated that the IDI "centers on building a trusting relationship where all input is honored, and candid revelations can thrive because it is understood that they will remain confidential unless the interviewee permits them to be disclosed" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 52).

Semi-structured IDIs "encourage an exchange of dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee that manifests the personal component that is a unique and important benefit to qualitative research" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 53). Furthermore, semi-structured IDIs build on "special rapport that create a shared experience between interviewer and interviewee that encourages a back-and-forth dialogue. This enabled [the] interviewer to react to the interviewee's comments by changing question-wording and interjecting relevant probing questions for clarification" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 54).

Historically IDIs have had a profound impact on qualitative research within the social sciences, particularly in education, marketing, communications, and psychology fields, to name a few (Leavy, 2014, p. 23). While there are inherent limitations of the design (i.e., inexperienced interviewer or social context of the interview environment), it would appear that there are more strengths and advantages upon which to build.

Such design allows researchers to build rapport with study participants, engage in active listening, and observe non-verbal communication cues. Additional benefits include the "reduced response bias that results from the interviewer-interviewee relationship, increased credibility of the data, and the data often rich in detail that serves as the basis for deciphering the narrative

within each interview" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 57). This researcher agreed that the strengths of this design allowed for greater detail and personal information that directly spoke to participants' experiences. As a result, this design was selected to obtain a direct description of small group members' experiences in multisite church settings "as it is lived through without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations" (Cypress, 2018, p. 304).

The combination of survey research, rooted in quantitative methods, ultimately complemented the interview method of qualitative methods. Steckler et al. (1992) confirmed that there were advantages of the mixed methods approach, citing how research studies were enhanced by the generalization of reliable data outcomes from quantitative research and the rich, detailed data production of qualitative methods (p. 1). This process captured the essence of participant responses to provide a holistic picture of multisite small group participants' attitudes, opinions, and experiences.

Setting

At the core of this research were small group participants within multisite churches, those defined as "one church in multiple locations" (Frye, 2011, p. 2) or those with multiple satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA (Edwards, 2016).

Edwards' (2016) research on the multisite church's unique structure of having multiple leaders, multiple locations, and varying small group styles was significant in understanding how and what the church communicates about small groups and how it develops disciples who make disciples for Christ.

Additional cultural implications for the small group ministry may impact the research setting, with particular attention drawn to stylistic designs of the small group ministry-as in the open versus closed, sermon-based or purpose-driven, in-person, online, or neighborhood-based

groups. According to Donahue and Gowler (2014), these stylistic designs may influence the frequency of small group gatherings, community effect, and spiritual disciplines often integrated into the nature and purpose of the small group ministry. For this reason, these attributes must be considered for inclusion in the research, setting the framework of the study, as items that may or may not contribute to the overall effectiveness of the small group ministry within this unique church setting.

Participants

The general population from which participants were selected emerged from the 2020 *Outreach Magazine's* 100 Fastest-Growing, Largest, Reproducing Churches in America list. This magazine collaborates with LifeWay Research to conduct annual surveys that measure the growth and size of various churches in America. It should be noted that since some churches appeared in multiple categories, all potential duplicates were removed from the final list.

Selection Process

The larger list produced a smaller subset of participants, particularly (a) those with a minimum of 1,000 attendees, since Bird (2014) suggested that this is when most churches go multisite, and (b) those with at least one additional campus. Initially, this process populated some 36 churches that met both criteria above, with churches ranging from 1,300 to over 13,000 average attendees and at least one additional campus located along the East Coast of the United States. Later in the study, the geographic restriction was removed, and the final population of churches increased from 36 to 58 churches that met the criteria above.

Using this initial baseline data, this researcher then used the information outlined on each of the 58 churches' websites to identify those that offered active small group ministries, the final selection criteria for this project. This step provided the list of multisite churches the researcher

used to communicate the research project's purpose, secure leadership support, and identify potential small group members that formally became the study's participants.

Quantitative Sampling

Random cluster sampling was the method of choice for this study. Leedy and Ormond (2016) suggested using this method when "the population of interest is spread over a large area, such that it isn't feasible to make a list of every population member" (p. 159). The use of cluster sampling in this scenario allowed for similarly characterized "smaller units containing an equally heterogeneous mix of individuals" (Leedy & Ormond, 2016, p. 159). The randomization of the cluster sampling method was most appropriate since the multisite churches that met the selection criteria were spread throughout the United States.

Securing a sample size of 157 survey participants for the quantitative portion of the study was the goal. It would have allowed for the generalization of responses to ensure representation of the larger population of multisite SG members. Securing the 157 survey responses would have represented an 80% confidence level and a +/- 5 confidence interval.

Qualitative Sampling

"In Patton's view, all types of sampling in qualitative research may be encompassed under the broad term of 'purposeful sampling' since qualitative inquiry typically focuses in-depth on relatively small samples selected purposefully to fit the study" (Coyne, 1997, p. 627). This type of sampling allows the researcher to "interview informants with a broad general knowledge of the topic or those who have undergone the experience and whose experience is considered typical" (Coyne, 1997, p. 628).

With this as a guide, purposeful, maximum variant sampling was used to optimize the diversity of small group participants for the study. The ultimate goal in using this type of

sampling was to have a diverse, heterogeneous group reflective of various denominations, genders, ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, geographical areas, small group types (open, closed, or sermon-based), and length of participation within the small group ministry. This detailed demographic data was not accessible by visiting each multisite church's website. Instead, this researcher attempted to capture such demographics via the online survey utilized in the first phase of this study.

Notably, this researcher used the purposeful sampling technique mentioned above in conjunction with the survey respondents from the first half of the study for identification in the second phase of this study. The last question on the survey questionnaire asked survey respondents if they would like to participate in the second half of the study involving the individual in-depth interviews (IDIs). Through this process, this researcher identified 10 participants from this sampling technique.

Role of the Researcher

The primary role of this researcher was to remain objective and minimize biases and risks for all study participants. Doing so included the creation of a questionnaire with the assistance of three experts in the field of Christian education and those within the multisite church ministry. The goal was to find participants who would feel free to share their experiences about their spiritual development as members of the small group ministry within their church. Additionally, as the research instrument for the qualitative portion of this study, this researcher was poised to conduct the in-depth interviews, serving as a partner and guiding participants in dialogue around the research questions through a semi-structured interview design. After collecting the data, this researcher engaged in coding and data analysis.

There were specific steps this researcher used to create a quality survey questionnaire. As the survey instrument, per Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 181), this researcher was aware of the potential impact her own biases could have on the study results. Potential reflexivity of such biases resulted from her experience as a participant and subsequent leader of a small group within the multisite church setting. The following assumptions and biases may have impacted the study:

1. The majority of participating small group members were born-again Christians who have confessed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Multisite church leaders understood the call to make disciples for Christ and have employed the small group ministry to accomplish this goal.
3. Small group members may be uncertain about their role in disciple making.
4. Participation in small group ministry was driven by the desire to connect with other members and build community versus the desire to grow into discipleship/disciple making.
5. Spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, studying the Word, and service to others are critical components embedded within the small group design.
6. Multisite church leaders are uncertain of and do not have an effective way of measuring spiritual growth among small group participants.

To account for the above biases, this researcher created a pilot survey questionnaire that was evaluated by seasoned researchers and used memo notetaking throughout the study and especially during each interview session, to segregate her thoughts, attitudes, and experiences from the raw data of study participants. This method, recommended by Creswell (2018), helped minimize bias interference and increased the credibility, reliability, and accuracy of data collected throughout the research process (p. 184).

Ethical Considerations

This researcher designed and facilitated this project in an ethically sound manner, protecting the confidentiality of the multisite churches and the confidentiality of all multisite church small group participants. Steps taken to preserve the confidentiality of each multisite

church and small group participants were outlined below. Furthermore, these steps were

presented and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the study began.

Specific considerations to maintain high-quality ethical standards included: (1) an email

outlining the (a) purpose of the research project, (b) multisite church selection criteria, (c)

confidentiality measures, (d) researcher contact information, and (e) withdrawal procedures to

multisite church leaders; and (2) a separate email disseminated to multisite church small group

study participants outlining the (a) purpose of the research project, (b) small group participant

selection criteria, (c) confidentiality measures, (d) researcher contact information, and (e)

withdrawal procedures.

Additionally, an informed consent form (ICF) was provided for each multisite church

small group member who agreed to participate in the study as well as a signed confidentiality

statement from the researcher to affirm her commitment to protecting their privacy throughout

the study. The ICFs are included in Appendices E (quantitative survey) and F (qualitative

interview) respectively. The forms articulated the purpose of the study, contact information for

the principal researcher, research procedures, what participation entails, participants' right to

withdraw from the study, and the right to ask for and receive access to raw interview data.

Additionally, these documents outlined confidentiality measures to preserve the identities of each

participant, both in the current research and in any potential studies or educational presentations.

Leavy (2017) recommended using pseudonym names to identify study participants and

preserve their privacy. A similar method was used in this study- replacing the names of the

multisite churches and small group participants with a numerical code to protect their identities

and confidentiality. Lastly, this researcher agreed to store all video and audio files from the

interviews on a password-protected computer for no more than three years. Study findings may

be used in future research projects and educational presentations; however, all recordings and video/audio files will be discarded after three years.

Data Collection Methods & Instruments

Creswell (2018) stated, "The data collection steps include setting the boundaries for the study through sampling and recruitment, collecting information through surveys, unstructured or semi-structured interviews, documents, and visual materials, as well as establishing the protocol for recording information" (p. 185). The information outlined below highlights the specific data collection methods, protocols, and procedures used to support this mixed methods study that focused on small group participant experiences in discipleship development in multisite churches throughout the United States.

Collection Methods

There are two sequential levels of data collection methods following this mixed methods study. The first included the quantitative survey and the second included the qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Outlined below are benefits associated with each data collection method.

Survey Research

Researchers like Leavy (2017) and Creswell (2018) outlined several benefits of survey research beyond generalizability. For example, they allow researchers to measure attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions about a certain issue at a specific time, which could be advantageous in an ever-changing world. Additionally, the tool's economies of scale and associated cost-effectiveness allow for greater distribution over several platforms, including traditional mail, telephone, email, or through the online survey tool Qualtrics (Leavy, 2017, p. 107).

Furthermore, a carefully constructed questionnaire that avoids ambiguous phrases, top-heavy, double-barreled, or double-negative questions that may lead to respondent burden or fatigue can increase the level of engagement among survey respondents. Leavy (2017) noted that constructing survey questions, their order, and the number of questions with respondents in mind can minimize respondent burden and fatigue. Leavy (2017) also said, "Respondent burden occurs to the degree that respondents experience their participation as too stressful or time-consuming," and that "high burden causes respondent fatigue which leads to a higher non-response rate and lower-quality responses" (p. 107). These variables were considered and accounted for to maximize the benefits of survey research.

This researcher utilized a survey questionnaire checklist, like that proposed by Creswell (2018), that employed a series of checks and balances to avoid survey design pitfalls. While the tool helps with procedural steps in the survey design, it also allowed this researcher to check for response bias. Creswell (2018) noted that this strategy posits researchers to conduct a descriptive analysis of the questions and a pilot or field test of the survey before employing the tool in the research (p. 148).

Ultimately, with these resources at hand, this researcher was able to design the Discipleship and Small Group Survey Questionnaire, or DSSQ (see Appendix L), that solicited the correct and accurate responses of survey respondents so that reliable responses were provided to add credibility to the survey findings.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Leavy (2017) said the purpose of phenomenological interviews was to "examine how people engage in processes of constructing and reconstructing meanings through daily interactions" (p. 129). Additional data collection methods were common in qualitative studies

and may include "public, private digital documents related to the phenomenon in the study, which may include newspapers, meeting minutes, official reports, personal journals, diaries, letters, emails, photographs, videotapes, website main-pages, social media tests, to name a few" (Creswell, 2018, p. 188).

The current study used a multi-layered approach to collect additional data from semi-structured interviews and digital content from the website pages of small group participants' multisite churches. As with the survey questionnaire referenced above, the Discipleship and Small Group Interview Questionnaire, or DSIQ, (see Appendix M) was developed and used for this study.

Unlike structured or unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews allowed for greater flexibility and collaboration between the researcher and study participants. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) specifically stated that "semi-structured interviews are less formal, flexible, and more conversational that allows for the interviewer to modify the questions for each interview as warranted by the particular responses or circumstances of the interviewee" (p. 52). Leavy (2014) said:

> Semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed important by the interviewee. The interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide. The interviewer has a greater say in focusing the conversation on issues that he or she deems important in relation to the research project. (p. 287)

The goal then was to create an environment that built trust and rapport between interviewer and interviewee where participants were free to respond to open-ended questions directly related to the phenomenon. These open-ended questions were closely related to the five proposed research questions listed in the first half of this chapter.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, this researcher also collected content data, keyword phrases, and descriptive language used to explain the nature and purpose of the small group ministry from each of the small group participants' multisite churches. These digital imprints, gathered from the ministry's web pages, provided insight into how each ministry conveys the vision and purpose of the small group ministry, how they approach spiritual growth, community, facilitate discipleship development, and encourage disciple making practices. For example, a brief search on Radiant Church's website revealed that they have "groups" as a subpage under the "Connect" menu link.

On this page, the ministry lists different ways individuals can get connected by joining or leading a small group. In addition, the site provided a brief statement of the purpose associated with the small group ministry, citing, "Radiant Groups have one simple purpose: to bring people together." The page goes on to emphasize the importance of building relationships "with others and with God," to foster "growth" (Radiant Church, 2020, para 1).

Additionally, this researcher used this type of data collection with other participating ministries and semi-structured interviews to create a larger framework. This process provided insight on how the articulated purpose of the small group ministry impacted the perceptions and subsequent attitudes and experiences of small group participants as they grew to become disciples who make disciples in their local communities.

The broader purpose of using website materials and any other print/digital documents was supported by researchers like Creswell (2018). He stated that "in good qualitative research, researchers draw on multiple sources of qualitative data to make interpretations about a research problem, which may include photographs, art objects, videotapes, website pages, emails, text messages, social media text, or any forms of sound" (Creswell, 2018, p. 186).

Instruments & Protocol

As previously mentioned above, the suggested Creswell (2018) survey design plan was used to guide the development of the survey questionnaire, the preferred instrument for the quantitative portion of the study. More specifically, a cross-sectional, fixed-choice, Likert-scale survey questionnaire was constructed for use throughout the first half of this research project. It was administered online via Qualtrics to obtain insight into the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the quantitative sample size of multisite church small group participants.

The advantages of using the online survey tools were many, including the ability to create and test the survey before its official use. Additionally, the online survey tool used in the study allowed for multiple delivery options through email, text message, or QR codes for participant ease of access and use. Finally, they allowed for expedient and accurate tracking of survey responses and built-in reports that assisted with data analysis and trend identifications.

While all of the built-in functionalities of the Qualtrics online survey tool were not suitable for use in this study, the tool nevertheless presented accessibility, tracking, and reporting features to leverage in addition to other data analysis procedures that contributed to the quality and potential validity of the survey. Specific procedures that spoke to the development and administration of the tool were discussed in further detail in the procedures section of this chapter.

For the qualitative portion of the study, this researcher served as the instrument tool (Creswell, 2018). However, for this portion of the study, it was recommended to use an interview protocol tool to "ask questions and record answers during a qualitative interview" (Creswell, 2018, p. 189). Leavy (2017) noted, "Researchers create interview guides that range from a list of

general lines of inquiry or themes they intend to cover to detailed lists of open-ended questions" (p. 140).

The DSIQ served as a guide throughout each participant interview, using preset numbers of questions related to the phenomenon. However, the semi-structured interview was not bound to these questions, which allowed this researcher to capitalize on the flexibility to ask additional follow-up questions that contributed to the knowledge essential for the study.

This researcher was prepared to use probing techniques, as recommended by Leavy (2017), "which demonstrates active listening" and encourages the participant to elaborate on responses to questions (p. 141). Additionally, throughout the interview, this researcher incorporated the funnel strategy proposed by Roller and Lavrakas (2015). Here, the interview begins with broader questions to build rapport before zeroing in on more specific questions related to the phenomenon (p. 140). This researcher utilized the steps outlined in the procedures section below to develop the questionnaire.

It was important to note that after both the quantitative survey questionnaire and the qualitative interview questionnaires were developed that this researcher followed the steps of Edwards (2016) and Creswell (2018), who affirmed the advantages of conducting pilot testing of the research instruments. Researchers like Campbell (2015) acknowledged that pilot testing was historically reserved for quantitative studies. However, his work and others like Creswell (2018) acknowledged the value of pilot testing for both quantitative and qualitative designs. Creswell (2018), for example, said that pilot testing surveys "establishes the content validity of scores on an instrument, provide an initial evaluation of the internal consistency of the items, and improve questions, format, and instructions" (p. 154). Similarly, on the qualitative side, Campbell (2015) noted, "conducting one or two test interviews can be very helpful for refining the interview guide

if using one to get a general feel for how the interview will go (Campbell, 2015, para 1). Majid et al. (2017) stated:

> The importance of pilot work has been expanded to qualitative inquiry, where it is carried out as preparation for the major study. It can be employed to address potential issues in following research procedures and trying out the questions. Moreover, interview protocols could be strengthened through piloting the interviews, as it is distinctly helpful to pilot the interview questions and adjust the interview guide accordingly before embarking into major study. (p. 1074)

This researcher utilized an expert panel, recommended by Bredfeldt (2020) and Majid et al. (2017) to test both research instruments through pilots. The expert panel provided quality feedback this researcher used to assess the content validity of the survey questions and interview questionnaire guide, especially as they related to the project's research questions. Feedback from these pilot tests was used to complete the necessary iterations to enhance both tools so that they extracted accurate descriptions of participant experiences with the small group ministry.

More specifically, the expert panel consisted of the following: Christian education leaders from academia, and/or those serving as pastors, directors, or small group ministry leaders, with a minimum of seven to 10 years of knowledge and experience with the small group ministry concept. The experiences of panel experts resulted from classroom instruction/curriculum developers within academia or as practitioners within the ministry. Collectively, this panel ascertained the quality, validity, and structure of the survey and interview questions, the sequential order of the questions, and the overall quality of the questions. This process assisted the researcher in determining whether the design ultimately answers each research question, subtopic question, or statement.

Memos, recommended by researchers like Creswell (2018) and Leavy (2014, 2017), were also utilized throughout each interview to minimize the risk of interviewer biases associated with the phenomenon in question. The use of this method had a profound impact during the data

analysis part of the research study. It preemptively segregated the researcher's thoughts, attitudes, and feelings associated with the phenomenon from the raw data of the interviews. Creswell (2018) stated that "taking notes or memos written during the research process allows researchers to reflect on their own personal experiences and consider how their experiences may shape their interpretation of results" (p. 184).

Procedures

Procedures for developing a quality research design are outlined in this section. The procedures involved the sampling and selection process for study participants, steps to secure consent forms, confidentiality statements, procedures for developing the interview questionnaire guide, revisions to this guide, and recording procedures for raw interview data collection methods.

The official email invitations outlined the nature and purpose of the study, as well as the research study design of the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. They were then sent to the senior pastor and, if appropriate, the small group ministry leader of each qualified multisite church identified from *Outreach Magazine's* 100 Fastest-Growing and Largest 2020 church list. All churches had to meet the following selection criteria:

- Those located anywhere in the United States.
- Those with a minimum of 1,000 members.
- Those with at least one additional campus.
- Those that offered an active small group ministry.

Follow-up emails were also sent to any non-responding pastors or small group ministry leaders after an initial two-week period, asking them to confirm their interest in moving forward as a participating ministry in the study.

After review, random cluster sampling guided the selection procedure for the quantitative portion of the study. An 80% confidence level would have yielded an estimated

157 survey respondents necessary to reflect the larger population's attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. For the second half of the study, 10 small group participants were identified from the above churches who agreed to participate in the study.

Two sets of official emails were sent to individuals participating in the quantitative surveys and the qualitative interviews, in sequential order, to confirm the study's purpose and design. These recruitment letters also explained steps to protect their privacy via numerical codes, provided instructions for completing the survey, their right to access raw data materials and study results, and their right to withdraw from the study. The formal consent to participate was embedded within the Qualtrics survey tool for the first half of the study. A separate consent form was emailed to individuals who opted to participate in the interviews for the second half of the study. Those who completed and signed the forms constituted the final number of participants for both portions of the study.

Secondly, the development of the survey and interview questionnaires played a critical role in the success of this study. This researcher leveraged relevant literature that spoke to the purpose and design of multisite churches, the small group ministry's biblical and theological origins, its potential to foster discipleship development, and the proposed research questions to develop the survey and interview questionnaire guide. Guiding this process was the ABCD's of Design strategy proposed by Bredfeldt (2020). This methodology directed this researcher's attention to desired learning outcomes by examining "the research questions, the creation of a question-topic statement chart or (QTS), those statements connected to sub-topics, and the initial design of the questionnaire tool" (Bredfeldt, 2020, Video Presentation).

After drafting the survey and interview questionnaire guide using the above steps, this researcher proceeded to conduct a pilot test with three experts in Christian education,

discipleship, and leaders within the small group ministry. Feedback from these pilot interviews

proved to be instrumental in revising questions, creating the interview format, and highlighting

opportunities for this researcher to enhance her skills as an effective interviewer.

The finalized survey questions were uploaded into the online survey tool and distributed

(via an embedded link) to survey participants in an email. This researcher capitalized on

Qualtrics' built-in features that informed participants of completion deadlines and scheduled

reminder emails to encourage completion of the surveys two weeks prior to the initially stated

deadline. As participants completed the survey, their contact information was removed from the

reminder distribution list and captured in a response tracker to avoid duplicate or unnecessary

communications. An appreciation notice was also sent to survey completers, thanking them for

participation in the study.

The web-based Zoom platform was used to conduct the qualitative interviews, similar

to the online administration of the survey. This tool was selected as a safety precaution in light

of the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, which prescribed major social distancing practices

to minimize the virus's risk and spread. However, there were many benefits to this online

platform, including recording options and private meeting room set-up capabilities. The virtual

face-to-face platform also allowed this interviewer to gauge the interviewees' verbal and non-

verbal communication cues during the interview.

Procedurally, the Zoom online platform required this researcher to create a private

(password-protected access code) meeting room for each interviewee to access for completion

of their interview. Participants were informed via email of the specified date, time, meeting

identification, and passcode for their scheduled interview. This same communication also

informed interviewees that the interviews would be recorded using the built-in feature of the

software and that the recorded video interview would be stored with an encrypted password in a secure location on the researcher's hard drive.

Data Analysis

For this mixed methods approach, there were three phases of data analysis: analysis of the quantitative survey findings, the reporting and analysis of the qualitative interviews, and finally, the analysis of how the qualitative interviews helped to build upon and explain the initial quantitative results.

Analysis Methods

There were many layers to the data analysis of this research study, which began with the analysis of the quantitative survey. The analysis steps included recording the number of participants that did and did not complete the survey, resulting in an overall completion rate percentage for the study. The Chi-square statistical analysis tool, embedded within the Qualtrics software, was used to measure the overall association between respondents' participation in the multisite church small group and discipleship development. This tool was also instrumental in identifying response bias, statistical significance, confidence interval, and the effect size instrumental in interpreting survey results.

Creswell (2018) stated that "statistical significance testing reports an assessment as to whether the observed scores reflect a pattern other than chance," while confidence intervals "provides a range of values that describe the level of uncertainty surrounding an observed score" (p. 158). Finally, the effect size is used to determine "the strength of the conclusions about group differences or the relationships among variables within the study" (Creswell, 2018, p. 158).

For the qualitative interviews, this researcher used Otter.ai to transcribe each of the recorded participant interviews. This tool used sophisticated technology to provide speech-to-

text transcription with advanced speech recognition software. Additionally, using such a tool helped increase the accuracy of the interview data to produce a high-quality transcript. After completing the above step, per the recommendation of Flood (2010) and Creswell (2018), this researcher engaged in a "naïve reading of the raw data" (Flood, 2010, p. 12) before attempting to organize and identify any recurring themes from the data.

Next, this researcher uploaded the transcripts into Delve, a high-quality coding software recommended for novice researchers. The tool was instrumental in assigning codes to recurring themes throughout each transcript. This researcher then extracted the data in appropriate APA formatted tables for a comprehensive view of all transcripts and the recurring themes that emerged from them. This step was duplicated to assess language used throughout each participating multisite church website to organize the data to identify any recurring themes related to the small group ministry's purpose, structure, and design.

The extracted data through the recurring themes that emerged throughout the coding process was now available for the process of triangulation, recommended by Cypress (2018). This data analysis process involved cross-referencing one or more interviews with another data source such as the digital and print media to assess the data's reliability, validity, and overall credibility. The totality of this process was designed to help this researcher "interpret the meaning of the themes and descriptions" (Creswell, 2018, p. 194), before developing a summary report that outlines how small group participants describe their process of spiritual growth and discipleship development within the multisite church. Finally, this researcher used data findings from the qualitative interviews to further explain the quantitative survey findings.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research often determines the research's quality, credibility, and accuracy (Creswell, 2018, p. 199). Aspects of trustworthiness are discussed in detail below.

Credibility

Leavy (2014) described credibility as:

> The elements that allow others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants' experiences; checking for the representativeness of the data as a whole; member checking involving returning to the participants to ensure that the interpretations of the researcher are accurate representations of participants' experiences; peer debriefing; and prolonged engagement. (p. 680)

Creswell (2018) echoed many of the above suggestions that speak to a study's credibility. As such, this researcher completed a number of these strategies, including triangulation, member checking, the use of rich, thick descriptions to convey the findings, and present negative or discrepant information "that runs counter to themes," and a peer debriefer to establish credibility within the proposed study (p. 199).

Triangulation of one or more interviews with digital and print media was used to "determine coherent justifications for themes" (Creswell, 2018, p. 199). This researcher listed the specific data analysis steps (data organization and coding techniques) and included any analytical or ethical dilemmas encountered in the report findings (Leavy, 2014, p. 604). Additionally, this researcher used "member checking to help determine the accuracy of the findings by taking the final report and specific descriptions back to study participants for them to determine whether the participants felt that they were accurate" (Creswell, 2018, p. 199). Lastly, the peer debriefer allowed someone external to the research to review and ask questions about the qualitative study so that the account resonated with people other than the researcher. This strategy also involves an interpretation beyond the researcher (p. 200).

Dependability

According to Leavy (2014) and Creswell (2018), dependability is likened to reliability in quantitative studies and speaks to whether other researchers can follow the procedures outlined in the study. The following steps used in the current study, recommended by Creswell (2018), included thorough documentation of study procedures, drift elimination, and memo writing about the codes and their definitions.

Confirmability

Leavy (2014) indicated that confirmability relates to the objectivity of the research in the study. She further defined confirmability as a "self-critical attitude on the part of the researcher about how one's own preconceptions affect the research" (Leavy, 2014, p. 680). Reflexivity measures were used throughout this study to articulate biases. Moreover, memos and notetaking were used throughout the data collection process to state potential preconceptions that might adversely affect the research. Leavy (2014) also suggested including the researcher being "open to the possibility that conclusions may need to be revised in light of new evidence" as a means of confirmability (p. 680). This line of thinking suggested that even with measures taken to minimize biases, possible evidence may be available to account for research findings.

Transferability

According to Leavy (2014), transferability referred to "the ability to transfer research findings from one group to another, where transfer of understanding was believed to occur if both contexts were similar. This is often accomplished through "thick descriptions used to provide the reader with detailed contextual information" (p. 680). These descriptions outline, in rich detail every facet of the study that enabled "other users or the reader of the research report to apply or transfer the design features to other research contexts" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 10,

21). These descriptions also included "rich details of the phenomenon being studied within the context in which the phenomenon occurs. This allows someone external to the research team to gain a more meaningful understanding of the phenomena the study as investigated" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 44).

To accomplish this, this researcher used thick descriptions to "capture the thoughts and feelings of study participants, as well as the complex web of relationships among them" to convey accurate interpretations that can be included in the report findings (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 44). The goal, according to Roller and Lavrakas (2015), is to enable readers to "cognitively and emotionally place themselves within the research context" (p. 45).

The report findings consequently include a summary of these techniques while simultaneously describing small group participants' experiences of their perceived growth and development through the small group ministry in multisite churches.

Chapter Summary

This chapter highlighted the mixed methods research approach used in this study, which sought to understand the perceptions of small group participants on their journey of discipleship development in multisite churches. The philosophy undergirding this design allowed for further investigation of the lived experiences (versus abstract concepts) of small group participants. This was expressed through their shared attitudes, feelings, and experiences by leveraging a quantitative survey and randomly selecting participants for qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews.

The multisite church setting served as the primary backdrop for the study, with its intricate and often complex leadership structures. Despite this, multisite churches-those described as one church in multiple locations-are committed to sharing the gospel and taking it

into the highways and byways of their communities to engage and compel others to come to

Christ. The small group ministry, known for its ability to foster community has been promoted as

a sure avenue to facilitate spiritual growth and discipleship development that leads to disciple

making. The culmination of the two was of utmost importance for this study.

    This chapter provided details about the specific research methodologies and procedures

this researcher used in this study. In addition to sampling techniques and the role of the

researcher, ethical considerations and IRB approval steps were also discussed. Furthermore, the

mixed method design was chosen as the best approach to comprehensively analyze discipleship

development among multisite church small group participants and their experiences.

    Lastly, specific data analysis techniques were outlined to ensure that adequate measures

were taken to enhance the study's quality, credibility, dependability, and transferability. These

steps ensured that the study accurately reflected the experiences of small group participants.

Overall, the goal of this chapter provided ample support for the research design and the

necessary steps to ensure a high-quality study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. For this research study, multisite churches were defined as those "churches with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p. 1). The design, purpose, and structure of the small group championed among ministry leaders to foster community and transformation that results in the development of Christ's disciples, served as the nucleus of this study. Furthermore, the intersection between the small group ministry and its potential impact within multisite churches, as seen through the eyes of participating members, was a key focus area of this study.

Methodologies used to collect, codify, and analyze study participants' data is highlighted throughout this chapter. Specifically, the quantitative survey and qualitative interview results were presented among study participants who were at least 18 years of age or older and actively participating in the small group ministry within their multisite church.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed methods design that involved two data collection phases: first, the quantitative phase, and second, the qualitative phase. Data collection for both phases of this study began in August 2021 after receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A) and continued through April 2022. During this time, multisite small group study participants were asked to complete a short, 10-minute survey that assessed their attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of their experiences as small group members within a multisite church. The

Discipleship and Small Group Survey Questionnaire (DSSQ), administered through the Qualtrics web-based survey platform, allowed participants the option to participate in a confidential, in-depth qualitative interview (IDI) where they could further elaborate on their discipleship and spiritual growth experiences as small group members. This constituted the second half of the study.

Before the official distribution of the email recruitment letter to prospective small group members commenced, email addresses and telephone numbers of pastors and small group directors were retrieved from the websites of qualified multisite churches. These churches were listed within *Outreach Magazine's* 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America's 2020 list. Initially, qualifying multisite churches had to have:

- At least one additional campus.
- A minimum of 1,000 average members.
- An active small group ministry.
- Located along the eastern coast of the United States.

36 qualifying churches emerged from this list. Email addresses and telephone number contact information were used over several weeks throughout September 2021 to connect with each of the pastors and small group ministry leaders. This initial outreach was used to explain the research's purpose and nature and enlist their support in recruiting active small group members for the study.

Results from this first outreach were minimal at best. 22 out of the 36 churches had no response; six showed some interest; three expressed no interest; one had inaccurate contact information; one no longer qualified, and three expressed interest in participating and agreed to share information about the study with their small group participants via the email recruitment letter (see Appendix B). The six churches that expressed a slight interest in the study also received the research overview email and the associated email recruitment letter (Appendix B)

and were given a week to review and share the information with key team leaders and decision

makers. Follow-up conversations were held with each of the six leaders, which typically

occurred within a week of receiving the research overview and recruitment email letter. All six

confirmed that they were not in a position to proceed with the study. Three main categories

surfaced from among these churches as reasons for their inability to participate in the study,

namely:

1. The timing of the study did not align with current church priorities.
2. The ministry had future plans of disseminating their own survey and did not want to confuse and/or inundate members.
3. It simply wasn't something they wanted to pursue.

At this juncture, 10 of the 36 churches had confirmed a disinterest in and/or were no longer

eligible to participate in the study.

Figure 1

Multisite Church Response Rates
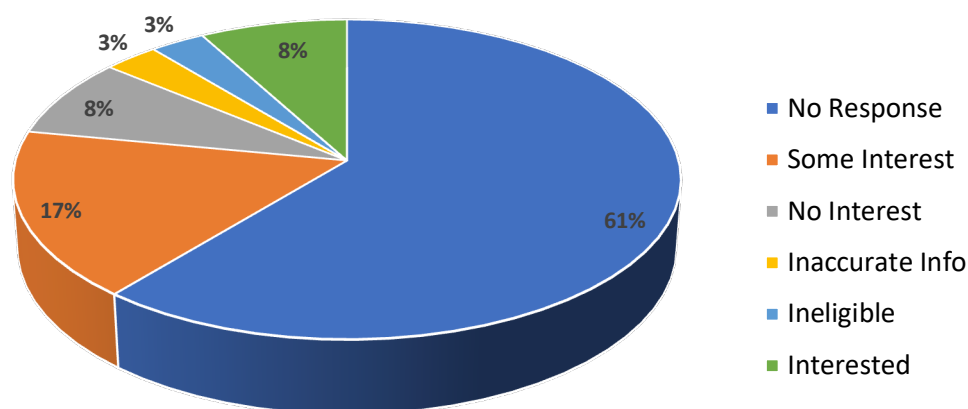
The remaining three churches that expressed an interest in sharing the study with their small group participants proceeded to share the email recruitment letter (see Appendix B), which included the link to the DSSQ, with active small group members. However, survey responses were very slow. After a couple of weeks had passed, there were only a handful of submissions. In fact, towards the end of October 2021, about a month after launching the study, only seven survey responses had been collected.

With less than a 20% response rate, a second attempt was made to connect with the 22 churches that had no response during round one of the initial outreaches. The researcher completed a second and third round of telephone calls. During this time, this researcher was redirected to another staff person who was classified as someone better suited to answer questions and make a decision about the study. Efforts were made through telephone calls and emails to connect with this person; however, the results were the same, ultimately with no response.

In the other cases, several voicemails and emails were left with either the church's main receptionist, the campus pastor, the small group ministry pastor, director, or assistant. These efforts yielded no change in responses from either the campus pastor or small group ministry leader. Lastly, a few social media posts were created and shared on this researcher's Facebook platform, including a post in the Facebook "Small Group Network" group and LinkedIn platforms, but to no avail.

Recognizing the stagnant nature of responses, this researcher conferred with her dissertation chair to explore other options and to vet the possibility of modifying the research proposal. This researcher considered extended the location criteria for multisite churches listed on the 2020 *Outreach Magazine's* 100 Fastest-Growing Churches in America list to multisite

churches located anywhere within the United States. Initially, the selection process used to identify eligible churches from the above list included churches that had at least one additional campus, a minimum of 1,000 average members, an active small group ministry, and were located along the Eastern Coast of the United States.

After 45 days without any major progress, this researcher submitted a modified application to the IRB for approval. This modification allowed her to expand the study beyond the East Coast, opening it up to multisite churches located anywhere in the United States that had at least one additional campus, an average of 1,000 weekly attendees, and an active small group ministry. This request was approved in November 2021 (see Appendix G) and extended the potential number of eligible multisite churches from 36 to 58.

This researcher was hopeful that this extension would yield a higher response rate from eligible churches and thereby increase the small group study participant rate for the quantitative portion of the study. This researcher repeated the process of identifying the pastors and small group leaders for the new churches added to the list. The process of completing telephone calls and sending email addresses continued, and outreach was made to an additional 22 churches. However, this yielded lackluster results similar to round one: 17 churches did not respond, 3 showed some interest, and 2 churches expressed interest in participating by sharing the opportunity with their small group members.

After the outreach effort, including both rounds, an appeal was sent to 58 churches. Out of the 58 churches, 39 churches never responded, 9 showed some interest but later declined, 3 expressed no interest, 2 no longer qualified, and 5 churches agreed to participate by sharing the study with their small group members, as highlighted in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Final Multisite Church Response Rate

Classification	N	Respondents %	Cumulative %
No response	39	67.24%	67.24%
Some interest	9	15.52%	82.76%
No interest	3	5.17%	87.93%
Ineligible	2	3.45%	91.38%
Interested	5	8.62%	100.00%
Total	58		

The campus pastor or the small group director for each of the five participating churches distributed the email recruitment letter to their active small group members. The email letter explained the study's nature and purpose, and included a link to the Qualtrics survey. The potential population was 3,360 representing 33% of the five participating churches' estimated active small group members. Four of the five churches distributed the information to at least one campus, while the fifth church distributed the information to all of its campuses.

Upon receiving this information, each small group member had to choose for themselves if they wanted to participate in the study. The official consent form, embedded into the survey, asked each potential respondent to verify their consent to participate in the study and to confirm their age of 18 years or older through logic-based questions. If a respondent answered no (they did not agree to participate in the study) or that they were under the age of 18, they were prevented from starting the survey. At the end of the data collection phase, 68 multisite small group members had completed the quantitative survey, concluding the first half of the study. The second half of the study involved qualitative, confidential, in-depth interviews. However, the sample size came from the last question of the DSSQ (see Appendix L). Procedurally, this researcher used a logic question for the last question of the DSSQ. The respondents who

indicated that they were interested in participating in the interview were required to provide an email address so this researcher could follow up with scheduling their interview.

Consequently, 60 of the 68 survey respondents answered the last survey question affirming their interest or disinterest in participating in the interview (see Table 2). Specifically, 26 (43%) affirmed their desire to elaborate further on their small group experiences through the interview, and 34 (57%) indicated that they were not interested in participating in the confidential, in-depth interview. A follow-up email and interview consent form (see Appendix F and Appendix K, respectively) were sent to each of the 26 respondents who opted to participate in the interview, reminding respondents of the purpose of the interview, the confidential nature of the interview, and the digital platform used to conduct the interview. Each respondent was invited to select a date and time most convenient for them to complete the interview. As a result, 10 of the 26 respondents (see Table 2) replied to the initial email confirming a date and time to schedule their interview.

Table 2

Qualitative Interview Response Rate

Classification	N	Respondents Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Initially, expressed interest on survey	26	43.33%	43.33%
Initially, expressed no interest on survey	34	56.67%	100.00%
No response to follow up email	16	61.54%	61.54%
Scheduled an interview	10	38.46%	100.00%

It was important to note that researchers vary in identifying the right sample size for qualitative interviews. Some like Roller and Lavrakas (2015) suggested a range from six to 100 depending on the complexity of the study and participant dynamics (p. 74). Others like Crouch

and McKenzie (2006) suggested using less than 20 interview participants to build rapport and improve data results (p.483).

As such, separate calendar invitations were sent to each of the 10 respondents outlining the Zoom video conferencing meeting details. The invitations highlighted the video meeting link, confidential passcode, and audio telephone numbers available for respondents to access on their selected interview date.

Each interview lasted no more than 30 minutes, was recorded using the Zoom software record feature, and saved onto this researcher's password-encrypted computer. Later, each audio file was uploaded into the Otter.ai web-based transcription software platform. This tool retrieved the raw audio recordings from each interview and transcribed it, segmenting this researcher's voice from that of the interviewee and their respective interactions throughout the interview. Transcribing this raw data was critical for analysis and coding. Furthermore, the tool's saving function allowed for naming conventions for each transcript allowing this researcher to assign a numerical code (i.e., SG Participant #1) for each transcript, thereby preserving the identities of interviewees as outlined in their consent form.

Next, each transcript was uploaded into the Delve web-based software platform to allow for the identification of recurring themes (i.e., words, phrases, thoughts) that were codified and compiled from each transcript. Specific analysis and findings from this phase of the study were discussed later in this chapter.

Demographic and Sample Data

A total of 68 multisite small group members participated in the study's quantitative survey, and 10 opted to participate in the in-depth qualitative interview. All 68 respondents were 18 or older and represented multisite churches in Maryland, Georgia, North Carolina, and

Tennessee. Despite efforts to expand the study opportunity to all qualifying multisite churches located anywhere within the United States, the official participating churches and subsequent small group members emerged from the East Coast, the initial geography for the study.

While gender and age specifics were not collected as part of the survey, 50% of the IDI participants were male, and 50% were female. The remaining demographic information collected mostly centered on the length of time in the small group ministry.

Only one respondent didn't answer the length of time they had participated in the small group ministry. However, of the remaining 67 respondents, 26 (39%) had been active small group members for five or more years; 17 (25%) had been active small group members for one to three years; 15 (22%) had been active small group members for less than one year, and 9 (13%) had been active small group members for three to five years, as highlighted in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Length of Time in the Small Group Ministry

Time	N	Respondents %	Cumulative %
Less than one year	15	22.39%	22.39%
One to three years	17	25.37%	47.76%
Three to five years	9	13.43%	61.19%
Five years or more	26	38.81%	100.00%
Total	67		

Data Analysis and Findings

This research was designed to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples, by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. A total of 24 survey questions, via the Discipleship and Small Group Survey Questionnaire or DSSQ (see Appendix L) and eight interview questions, via the Discipleship and Small Group Interview Questionnaire

or DSIQ (see Appendix M) were used in alignment with the below research questions for the quantitative phase of the study. Subsequently, the analysis and specific findings were outlined by each research question below.

Research Question One: Small Group Purpose

The first research question in this study sought to understand how small group participants would describe their perceptions of the purpose of the small group ministry (SGM). Previous research surrounding the SGM indicated that opportunities for growth in communities of faith and evangelism were among the top reasons for utilizing the small group as a vehicle for spiritual growth and development.

As such, three statements within the DSSQ (see Appendix L) were created to understand the SGM's purpose. Survey respondents were asked to identify if the purpose of the small group ministry, as they understood it, was primarily related to (a) building communities of faith, (b) developing disciples of Christ, or (c) evangelism.

Survey results for the more direct statements surrounding the purpose revealed a near statistical tie between developing disciples and building communities of faith as the primary purpose of the SGM. For example, 95% (n=60) of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that developing disciples of Christ was the primary reason for the SGM, while 94% (n=59) strongly agreed or agreed that building communities of faith was the primary reason for the ministry. Meanwhile, 60% (n=38) strongly agreed or agreed that the primary purpose of the SGM was evangelism. These results are highlighted in Table 4 below.

Table 4

SGM Purpose

Categories	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std Dev	Variance
Build Communities of Faith	60.32% (n=38)	33.33% (n=21)	4.76% (n=3)	1.59% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	1.48	0.66	0.44
Developing Disciples of Christ	61.90% (n=39)	33.33% (n=21)	3.17% (n=2)	1.59% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	1.44	0.41	0.41
Evangelism	36.51% (n=23)	23.81% (n=15)	22.22% (n=14)	17.46% (n=11)	0.00% (n=0)	2.21	1.11	1.24

Notably, there was greater ambiguity around evangelism as a primary purpose for the SGM, with 22% (n=14) of respondents providing a neutral response to that statement. Edwards and Smith (2014) stated that providing a neutral option in Likert Scale surveys allows for respondents who are indifferent to the topic or uncertain about how best to answer it to select this option.

Other researchers indicated that providing a neutral response allowed those who were "ignorant about or indifferent to a subject to select no opinion or neutral instead of being forced to choose a response that did not reflect their true beliefs" (Edwards & Smith, 2014, para 5). Similarly, over 17% (n=11) disagreed with the evangelism statement, causing greater speculation surrounding the disparity between the options.

This researcher wanted to determine if there was any change in perception regarding the purpose of the SGM between those who had participated in the ministry the longest versus those who had recently joined the SGM. However, the results were not statistically significant, with *p*-values of 0.18, 0.24, and 0.51 between building communities of faith, developing disciples of Christ, and evangelism, respectively.

Research Question Two: Comfort Level in Discipling Others

The second research question sought to understand how comfortable multisite small group members were in discipling others by walking others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the SGM. Four statements were used to assess general comfort level across many activities involved in discipling others, namely sharing God's word, praying for, and sharing their faith with others (see Appendix L). Two additional statements were designed to assess if SG members understood their role in fulfilling the Great Commission-the command to go and make disciples and to assess their readiness to lead a small group of their own. Together, six statements were used to assess multisite small group members' perceptions regarding their role in discipling others.

Table 5 demonstrated that nearly 62% (n=37) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were comfortable walking others through their spiritual journey as they grow in God since joining the SGM; 68% (n=41) affirmed an increased comfortability in telling others about God's word since joining the SGM; 80% (n=48) affirmed an increased comfortability in praying for others since joining the SGM, and lastly, 30% (n=18) stated that they shared their faith with others before joining the SGM.

The survey revealed that 63% of multisite SG members understood the mandate within the Great Commission, encouraging them to go and make disciples. However, only 40% (n=24) of the same group stated that they wanted to lead their own small group in the future.

Table 5

Comfort Level and Disciple Making

Category	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std Dev	Variance
I feel comfortable in walking others through their	31.67% (n=19)	30.00% (n=18)	31.67% (n=19)	6.67% (n=4)	0.00% (n=0)	2.13	0.94	0.88

spiritual journey since joining my SGM.							
My comfortability in telling others about God's Word has increased since joining the SGM.	33.33% (n=20)	35.00% (n=21)	25.00% (n=15)	6.67% (n=4)	0.00% (n=0)	2.05	0.92	0.85
My comfortability in praying for others has increased since joining the SGM.	36.67% (n=22)	43.33% (n=26)	13.33% (n=8)	6.67% (n=4)	0.00% (n=0)	1.90	0.87	0.76
I rarely shared my faith with others before joining the SGM.	3.33% (n=2)	26.67% (n=16)	28.33% (n=17)	31.67% (n=19)	10.00% (n=6)	3.18	1.04	1.08
Participation in my church's SMG has helped my understanding of the Great Commission and has encouraged me to go and make disciples of others.	18.33% (n=11)	45.00% (n=27)	26.67% (n=16)	10.00% (n=6)	0.00% (n=0)	2.28	0.88	0.77
I would like to lead a small group of my own in the future.	23.33% (n=14)	16.67% (n=10)	36.67% (n=22)	18.33% (n=11)	5.00% (n=3)	2.65	1.17	1.36

The Qualtrics chi-square test revealed no significant statistical difference between the length of time, from less than one year to five years or more in the SGM, and increased comfort levels across all areas among SG members in discipling others. However, Table 6 below suggested that overall, comfort levels did increase over time.

For example, those who strongly agreed or agreed that they were comfortable walking others through their spiritual journey since joining the SGM went from 47% for one year or less to 76%, with those participating for five years or more. SG members also increased their comfort level in telling others about God from 40% in year one or less to 81% in year five, with similar results when praying for others, increasing their comfort level from 73% in year one or less to 85% by year five.

Table 6

Comfort Level, DM, and Time Variables

DSSQ Statements		Length of Time in SGM		p-value
		I have been an active small group member for less than one year	I have been an active small group member for five or more years	
I feel comfortable walking others through their spiritual journey as they grow in God since joining my small group	Strongly Agree	13.33%	38.10%	0.2
	Agree	33.33%	38.10%	
	Neutral	33.33%	23.81%	
	Disagree	20.00%	0.00%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0.00%	
My comfortability in telling others about God's Word has increased since joining the small group ministry	Strongly Agree	20.00%	38.10%	0.3
	Agree	40.00%	42.86%	
	Neutral	26.67%	19.05%	
	Disagree	13.33%	0.00%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0.00%	
My comfortability in praying for others has increased since joining the small group ministry	Strongly Agree	20.00%	42.86%	0.7
	Agree	53.33%	42.86%	
	Neutral	13.33%	9.52%	
	Disagree	13.33%	4.76%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0.00%	
Participation in my church's small group ministry has helped my understanding of the Great Commission and has encouraged me to go and make disciples of others	Strongly Agree	6.67%	23.81%	0.4
	Agree	60.00%	52.38%	
	Neutral	33.33%	14.29%	
	Disagree	0.00%	9.52%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0.00%	
I would like to lead a small group of my own in the future	Strongly Agree	13.33%	28.57%	0.3
	Agree	13.33%	19.05%	
	Neutral	40.00%	38.10%	
	Disagree	33.33%	14.29%	
	Strongly Disagree	0.00%	0.00%	
	Strongly Agree	6.67%	0.00%	0.3
	Agree	13.33%	23.81%	

I rarely shared my faith with others before joining the small group ministry at my church	Neutral	26.67%	28.57%	
	Disagree	46.67%	38.10%	
	Strongly Disagree	6.67%	9.52%	

Interestingly, a number of survey respondents remained neutral across all areas (see Table 5), whether it pertained to their comfortability in (a) walking others through their spiritual journey (31.67%, n = 19), (b) telling others about God's word (25%, n = 15), (c) praying for others (13.33%, n = 8), and (d) sharing their faith with others (28.33%, n = 17). These individuals were reluctant to agree or disagree with the statements, either because they were ambivalent and unable to finalize their true perceptions or simply preferred not to answer.

Furthermore, while 40% of respondents remained neutral in their desire to start their own small group in the future-a key element of the reproductive nature of disciple making-overall, this metric increased over time, from 27% of those with one year or less in the SGM to 47% for those with five years or more experience in the ministry.

Research Question Three: Small Group Structure, Design, and Personal Growth

The objective of the third research question was to assess how the structure and design of the SGM may have impacted small group members' perceptions of their own personal growth and discipleship development. Two sets of statements were presented to survey respondents to assess elements of the SGM structure and design and its potential impact on spiritual growth. The first set focused primarily on the SG structure and design, namely, getting insight on meeting frequency, open versus a closed design, materials covered during SG gatherings, and general perceptions on spiritual growth and development. The second set of statements focused more on perceived personal spiritual growth and development, namely getting insight on spiritual disciplines often cited as elements of ongoing maturity and growth in the Lord, like prayer, meditating on God's word, and fasting.

Table 7 below reflects results from the first set of statements and shows that 97% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the frequency of their small group meetings. 83% stated that their SG had an open design where their SG leader and group members decided what the group would study. Nearly 80% confirmed that they regularly review their pastor's sermons and other biblical study guides throughout their sessions, and 83% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the structure and design of their small group were conducive to their spiritual growth and development.

Table 7

SG Structure

Categories	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std Dev	Variance
I like the meeting frequency of my small group	49.21% (n=31)	42.86% (n=27)	4.76% (n=3)	3.17% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	1.62	0.72	0.52
We regularly review my pastor's sermons and/or other biblical study guides during my small group	46.03% (n=29)	33.33% (n=21)	11.11% (n=7)	9.52% (n=6)	0.00% (n=0)	1.84	0.96	0.93
The structure and design of my small group is conducive for my spiritual growth and development	39.68% (n=25)	42.86% (n=27)	15.87% (n=10)	1.59% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	1.79	0.76	0.58
We have an open design where my small group leader and/or members decide what the group will study	47.62% (n=30)	34.92% (n=22)	14.29% (n=9)	3.17% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	1.73	0.82	0.67

There were other aspects of the design of the SGM that respondents (n=60) highlighted, with the majority of them (73%) confirming that their small group is always open for other individuals to join throughout the year versus 27% who confirmed that their group falls under a

closed design, where the group is closed to a maximum number of individuals for a specific period of time throughout the year.

Additionally, survey respondents (n=114) had the opportunity to highlight, selecting all applicable options, whether or not their SGM offered coed groups, groups categorized by age, gender, geographic locations, or common themes (forgiveness, singles, etc.), and if they had the opportunity to join more than one group throughout the year, captured below in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

SG Design Options
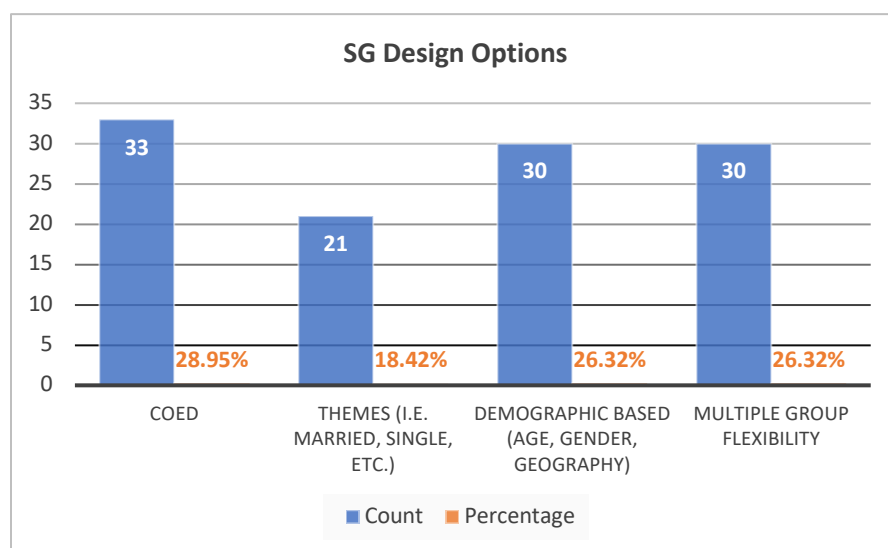
Table 8 depicts the results from the personal, spiritual growth subset of statements which revealed that participation in the small group has helped the majority (90%) of survey respondents grow into disciples of Christ. This has increased their quiet time with the Lord (71%) and has positively impacted their prayer life (81%).

However, while many (58%) strongly agreed or agreed that they were encouraged to invite others, especially non-believers to their group, 31% remained neutral on this subject. In addition, the area of fasting remained relatively low compared to the other areas, with only 21%

of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that they could understand and apply the principles

of fasting to their life since joining the SGM. Overwhelmingly, 45% of survey respondents

disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, while 34% remained neutral.

Table 8

Personal Growth

Categories	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std Dev	Variance
I believe that my participation in the small group is helping me to grow into a disciple of Christ	50.00% (n=31)	40.32% (n=25)	9.68% (n=6)	0.00% (n=0)	0.00% (n=0)	1.60	0.66	0.43
My participation in the small group ministry has helped me to learn more about and apply God's word to my daily life	51.61% (n=32)	38.71% (n=24)	8.06% (n=5)	1.61% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	1.60	0.71	0.50
I am encouraged to invite others, including non-believers, to my small group	30.65% (n=19)	27.42% (n=17)	30.65% (n=19)	11.29% (n=7)	0.00% (n=0)	2.23	1.01	1.01
My prayer life has grown since joining the small group	35.48% (n=22)	45.16% (n=28)	14.52% (n=9)	4.84% (n=3)	0.00% (n=0)	1.89	0.83	0.68
My quiet time of meditating and seeking the Lord has grown since joining the small group ministry	24.19% (n=15)	46.68% (n=29)	24.19% (n=15)	4.84% (n=3)	0.00% (n=0)	2.10	0.82	0.67
I understand and have applied principles of fasting more since joining my small group	6.45% (n=4)	14.52% (n=9)	33.87% (n=21)	40.32% (n=25)	4.84% (n=3)	3.23	0.97	0.95

Research Question Four: Quantitative & Qualitative Impact

The above findings were connected to the quantitative aspect of the research.

They drew insight from the 68 recorded answers to various subsets of statements within the

DSSQ designed to assess SGM participants' perceptions about their growth and development as

Christ's disciples. One final category of the DSSQ used five statements (see Appendix L) to

assess general perceptions of study participants' overall small group experiences. At least one of

the statements linked to general perceptions regarding (a) one's excitement, (b) desire to join the

SGM, (c) their understanding of the purpose of the SGM, (d) personal/spiritual growth, and (e)

discipleship development.

Table 9 captured these responses, highlighting that 86% (n=55) were excited to join the

small group, and 91% (n=58) were driven by the desire to connect with others. The research also

demonstrated that 50% (n=32) affirmed that their SGM was mostly concerned with evangelism,

while 55% (n=35) believed that their growth as a disciple of Christ was connected to the SGM.

Lastly, 88% (n=56) affirmed that their small group leader and fellow members were instrumental

in helping them grow in God.

Similar to many other statements highlighted in the above findings, several respondents

remained neutral across many of the statement categories. For example, 23% were ambivalent or

preferred not to answer their true feelings on whether their SGM focuses more on the

development of its members or inviting new or nonbelievers into the group. Similarly, 18%

remained neutral, and over 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the small group ministry

was not facilitating their growth as a disciple.

Table 9

General Perceptions

Categories	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std Dev	Variance
I was excited to join my church's small group ministry	57.81% (n=37)	28.13% (n=18)	10.94% (n=7)	3.13% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	1.59	0.80	0.65
Participation in my small group is primarily driven by a desire to connect with others	40.63% (n=26)	50.00% (n=32)	6.25% (n=4)	3.13% (n=2)	0.00% (n=0)	1.72	0.72	0.51
My small group caters more to the development of its	10.94% (n=7)	39.06% (n=25)	23.44% (n=15)	25.00% (n=16)	1.56% (n=1)	2.67	1.02	1.03

members than inviting new and/or non-believers to join the group								
I don't believe I would be growing into a disciple of Christ without my participation in the small group ministry	26.56% (n=17)	28.13% (n=18)	17.19% (n=11)	20.31% (n=13)	7.81% (n=5)	2.55	1.29	1.65
My small group leader and/or fellow members help me in my walk with God	50.00% (n=32)	37.50% (n=24)	10.94% (n=7)	1.56% (n=1)	0.00% (n=0)	1.64	0.74	0.54

A large portion of research question four sought to combine the quantitative findings with that of the qualitative responses from those who participated in the in-depth interview (IDI) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the SGM among multisite small group members.

Therefore, the below introduces the qualitative data gained from the 10 IDIs. While all survey respondents had the opportunity to participate in the second phase of the study through the confidential IDI, 43% (n=26) elected to participate in the interview. However, after initial and follow-up email outreaches to each of the 26 survey respondents, only 10 proceeded to schedule and complete an IDI. Of these 10, three admitted that they had or were currently serving as a SGM leader.

The Discipleship and Small Group Interview Questionnaire (DSIQ), listed in Appendix M utilized eight questions to guide the conversation with each of the 10 interviewees. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed this researcher to ask follow-up questions throughout the interview to better understand responses and to ask for additional details regarding a new term, phrase, or concept introduced by the interviewee. Generally, the DSIQ aligned with the research questions and leveraged categories found within the design of the DSSQ to allow interviewees to elaborate on their small group experiences.

Overall, there was congruency between what interviewees elaborated on in the IDI and the general DSSQ responses. Delve coding software was used to review raw transcript data followed by a manual inductive or open coding process. This process allowed codes to emerge directly from the interviewees' responses. Many recurring codes or themes centered around (1) initial reasons for joining the SGM, (2) disciple making, (3) fellowship activities, and (4) personal growth.

It should be noted that there was an overlapping of some codes, where interviewees used terms specifically (i.e., Bible study or book study) and other times where terms or activities were grouped together to describe a comprehensive concept; these terms are referenced in Table 10 below which highlights beliefs associated with each group category.

Table 10

Thematic Code Grouping & Transcript Frequency

Group Meanings	Codes	Frequency/ #Transcripts	Valuable Element Per Transcript Freq	Associated Beliefs
Initial Involvement-Community	IV-C	9	50%	Foundational; essential especially in large ministry
Initial Involvement-Personal Connections	IV-P	2		
Initial Involvement-Family	IV-F	6		
Initial Involvement-Support	IV-S	2		
Disciple Making-Evangelism	D-E	7	60%	Responsible for fulfilling the Great Commission
Disciple Making-Outreach	D-O	7		
Disciple Making-General	D-G	8		
Disciples Making-Process of	D-M	4		
Disciple Making-Faith	D-F	3		
Fellowship Activities-Outings	FA-O	9	50%	Strengthens Connection & Engagement; Builds Family Environment
Fellowship-Devotionals	FA-D	3		
Fellowship Activity Prayer	FA-P	8		
Fellowship Activity-Worship	FA-W	2		
Fellowship Activity-Communion	FA-C	1		
Personal Growth-Design	PG-D	9	60%	

Personal Growth-Structure	PG-S	7		Ingredients necessary for strong SG, helped to foster spiritual growth
Personal Growth-Flexibility	PG-F	5		
Personal Growth-Curriculum	PG-C	5		
Personal Growth-Training	PG-Tr	6		
Personal Growth-Time	PG-T	4		
Personal Growth-General	PG-Ge	7		

Purpose of the SGM

Before divesting into the above thematic groups, it was important to note that all of the

IDI participants completed the DSSQ and answered questions related to their perceived

understanding of the purpose of the SGM. The responses highlighted discipleship, building

communities of faith, and evangelism. Overall, however, there was great ambiguity surrounding

this topic for each of the 10 interviewees.

For example, SG Participant #7 shared that he "didn't have a clear understanding of what

the church wanted to accomplish through the SGM." Similarly, SG Participant #9 recalled that

"no one had spoken specifically about what the small group is," and [he] had to reference

experience from a former ministry leader to explain the purpose of the SGM. SG Participant #8

stated that she went online to her church's website to learn more about the SGM, and SG

Participant #5 stated that she didn't recall the vision being clearly explained. The remaining IDI

participants varied in their responses, ranging from discipleship (becoming and making disciples)

to community.

Utilizing the triangulation process, this researcher cross-referenced interviewee

perceptions on the purpose of the SGM with language on participating churches' websites. This

process revealed congruent alignment on: (1) connecting people, (2) community, (3) growing in

faith, (4) growing together spiritually, (5) activating faith, (6) encouraging fellowship, and (7)

evangelism. Table 11 shows where the DSSQ responses, DSIQ perceptions, and participating

language on participating churches' websites overlap.

Table 11

Purpose Descriptor Overlap

Category	DSSQ Descriptors Present	DSIQ Descriptors Present	Church Website Descriptors Present
Community	x	x	x
Communities of Faith	x		
Connect with Others	x	x	x
Family		x	
Growing Together		x	x
Growing in Faith		x	x
Fellowship			x
Facilitating Spiritual Growth	x	x	x
Evangelism		x (implied)	

***Initial Involvement***

There were many direct and indirect reasons that led IDI participants to join the small group, captured in Figure 3 below. Direct drivers for initial involvement were closely aligned with an intrinsic need or motivation, such as a desire for personal connections with people (IV-P, n=2), find support (IV-S, n= 2), family, (IV-F, n= 6), or search for community (IV-C, n=9). Indirect reasons for becoming a small group member were more closely aligned with a welcomed obligation that occurred when someone accepted an invitation to attend the SG gathering or with a prerequisite discipleship course that eventually evolved into an informal small group. While interviewees expressed emotions and feeling associated with their experience in the small group after joining, little to no emotions were observed that impacted the nature of these driving forces to join the SGM. Overall, these reasons were foundational beliefs for over 50% of the IDI participants.

Figure 3

Initial Involvement & Reasons for Joining the SGM
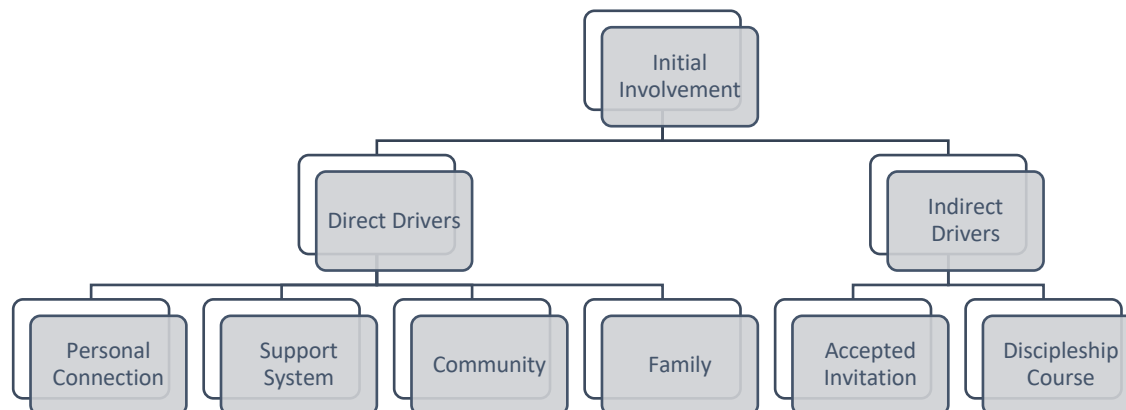
Discipleship Impact

Although not explicitly expressed as the SGM purpose, many of the IDI participants acknowledged that they had a commitment to and desire to help others in their walk with the Lord. They either shared their faith with nonbelievers or encouraged those within their SG. A few participants like SG Participant #10 stated that "one of the things that the small group has done for me, is really encouraged me to be more open to talking to people about my faith, particularly within actually, believe it or not, within my family." He continued, "So we're trying to take, always trying to take others through, you know, reaching out to them, teaching them the gospel of Christ." Table 12 highlights thoughts surrounding the impact the SGM has had on fostering the desire to disciple others, sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and extending to personal testimonies, and spreading God's love.

Table 12

Perceptions on Discipling Others

Perceptions on Discipling Others	Code
I mean, our job is to share the good news	D-E

One of the things that I think the small group has done for me, is really encouraged me to be more open to talking to people about my faith, particularly within actually believe it or not within my family.	D-F
So, we're trying to take, always trying to take others through, you know, reaching out to them, teaching them the gospel of Christ.	D-E
I'm just basically sharing, you know, the gospel of Jesus, you know, and being unkind spreading love.	D-E
To enable others to find their path to Jesus Christ.	
It's just, it's just great to begin to talk to people and share with them how the Lord has helped you through your life,	D-G
I was sitting at so and so and, you know, I started talking to this brother and before, you know, and next thing, you know, you know, led him to Christ. You know, maybe next thing you know, you can invite him to church, you can invite him over Bible study.	D-E
But definitely, whenever the opportunity would present itself, or the spirit urged me to reach out to share my faith, to invite someone in, you know, be ready to make disciples to introduce somebody to Christ.	D-F
We would go out, and, you know, we go out to a basketball court, we go out to gyms, we have our tracks, you know, we might play ball who, you know, and family, and it was evangelism moves, we would go to places and do things and share our faith, right.	D-O
My understanding is to just go out and just let people know about God, and to just help them to start a relationship with the Lord.	D-E
So, I have a passion for helping people get closer to Christ and build a relationship.	
So, in other words, you keep branching out into more groups, you know, and just raising leaders to do what you know, to, to build on that because it's basically just to, you know, grow the kingdom.	D-M
And that's what we're here for is to, to disciple one another, and to just minister to each other.	D-M
I mean, at the end of the day, that's, as any sort of Christian that's what we're called to do, right is to make disciples.	D-M
But I think one of the things that's really encouraged us to be more open with and, you know, how we act in, in our community, as disciples, as a living example of how you know, to live.	D-M
All right, and so, you know, going forward then making disciples, that's, you know, a part of the overall church mantra.	D-M

Since disciple making themes were present, on 60% of the transcripts, great value was ascribed to the desire and responsibility in fulfilling the Great Commission. These responses suggested that the SGM was instrumental in encouraging and supporting SG participants' roles as disciple makers of Christ by empowering them to share the gospel and their faith with others.

Fellowship Activities

As noted in earlier chapters, the SGM is known to include activities that profoundly impact its members. Many of these activities are reminiscent of Jesus' time with his own disciples and reflective of those witnessed throughout the early church in Acts 2:42-47.

IDI participants affirmed that these activities, highlighted in Table 13 below, were present

throughout their SG gatherings. These activities helped strengthen their connection with each

other, increased overall engagement, and converged to build a family-like environment where

they were "doing life together."

Table 13

Fellowship Activities

Fellowship Activities	Code
We had meals together, we counseled each other, we support one another.	FA-G/O
We were in each other's lives. Checking in, how's everybody doing? What's going on in your life, give me some good news.	FA-G/O
And we wrap up with, we wrap up with prayer requests, okay, so we know what's going on with everybody.	FA-P
And then at the, like, the last Saturday of every month, I do a hangout in person hangout, and we can go and have just coffee and or lunch, dinner, whatever it is, and we just talk, you know, nothing spiritual.	FA-G/O
We have we've made it a point to have several face-to- face meetings where we've gotten together with you know, families together, match for dinner, or we actually went to Durham Bulls baseball game over the summer.	FA-G/O
We have like a group chat, on WhatsApp, and we, you know, pray for one another and encourage one another every day.	FA-G/O
Um, prayer, and just dissecting the word.	FA-P
Well, sometimes we just fellowship. Sometimes we also split off and we'll do girls' nights or guys' nights.	FA-G/O
We also do devotionals together.	FA-D
And then we do just outings, I would go to Braves game, or go to some other event.	FA-G/O
We're getting together, and maybe there's some prayer and some devotion and all those things are there.	FA-P/D
But prayer, prayer and devotion, I would say is the constant across all of them.	FA-P/D
We do communion.	FA-C
We tend to try to go with a, a praise and worship, period.	FA-W
So, we do a little bit of, of everything, we have a message that we share, and we do at least three or four worship songs.	FA-W

Embedded within these activities are the elements from which many IDI participants

expressed in their initial reasons for joining the SGM-community. For example, SG Participant

#5 said that he "cannot state enough that these people are like family to me." He also shared, "It's

helping us to do life together." SG Participant #4 stated that "the other side of that is that when

we come to these gatherings as small groups, we don't leave our children." This idea reinforces the family environment the SGM has become for these participants.

Personal Growth

IDI participants elaborated on the dynamics of the small group design and its structure, affirming the option of open or closed groups, and those based on age, gender, and marital status. More importantly, many (n=7) emphasized the general flexibility they enjoyed within the SG design. This flexibility manifested in various ways, with all having the option to choose the location of their gatherings (homes, cafes) and others having the option to choose their curriculum. These latter options included biblical studies (n=3), sermon teachings (n=6), general Christian book studies (n=6), or a corporate curriculum through a third-party vendor like Right Now Media (n=3). SG leaders (n=3) from among the group also highlighted that they have the option to take ownership of their group by creating customized names reflective of their purpose. This created a rotating schedule for SG members to lead different spiritual activities or gatherings and provide feedback to senior leaders about successes and challenges they have encountered while leading the SG.

Another concept that emerged from the interviews was continuity as it related to the curriculum's design (fixed time schedules) and structure of the curriculum. For example, SG Participant #7 expressed that the SG served its members better without hard starts and stops associated with time-sensitive groups and shifting curriculum topics. Requiring individuals to shift to a different group every 6-8 weeks to follow after a topic taught by other SG leaders disrupted the continuity needed to establish connections and engage other SG members. This also disrupted momentum and ongoing growth. In one case, this shift also created overlapping

schedules, where one curriculum topic had not yet finished before another topic of interest opened up under a different leader.

Final IDI Participant Observations

IDI participants underscored the SGM's impact on their lives as growing disciples and disciple makers of Christ. The following descriptive words and phrases were used when IDI participants were asked to use one word to describe their experiences with the SGM: (1) very pleasant, (2) family, (3) good learning experience, (4) awful-related to COVID impact, but overall meaningful, (5) empowering, (6) amazing, (7) fulfilling, (8) life changing, and (9) very positive.

While responses were overwhelmingly positive, it was important to note that more than one IDI participant (n=6) referenced the impact the COVID-19 global pandemic had on their SG. The shift to the online, virtual environment decreased engagement opportunities, increased complexities around childcare (as some attendees no longer had a dedicated volunteer to watch kids like they did during live, face-to-face gatherings), caused greater distractions, and adversely affected the family and community-like environment in which they could thrive.

Another critical observation that emerged from the group was the need for additional clarity on the purpose of the SGM. Participants discussed how the vision or purpose was often unclear and how infrequent communications surrounding the SGM vision or purpose was shared. In fact, clarity of purpose, a decreased focus on recruiting, and the need for more training and support for SG leaders were suggested items IDI participants would change within their church's SGM.

Evaluation of the Research Design

Overall, the sequential, explanatory mixed methods design proved to be beneficial for this study in that it allowed for a comprehensive and complementary explanation of the study phenomenon. Furthermore, it allowed this researcher to "focus on data that was relevant to the research project and use one data set to build upon another" (Almalki, 2016, p. 293).

This is critical to a mixed methods research design in that it balances the objective nature of the quantitative data with the subjective nature of the qualitative data to clarify, validate and elaborate on the study phenomena (Manjengwa, 2020). Almalki (2016) echoed this sentiment, saying the mixed methods design "offers the opportunity to develop more convincing and robust social explanations of the social processes being investigated" (Almalki, 2016, p. 293). In this study, the qualitative in-depth interviews provided another layer of detail that would have otherwise been inaccessible from a quantitative study alone.

The DSSQ provided a foundation for the thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions of SG members as it pertained to the purpose, design, structure, and impact the SGM had in facilitating disciple making practices and spiritual growth. The DSSQ also confirmed how influential community could be in fostering spiritual growth and discipleship development among SG members, specifically growing in a faith-filled community. The two methodologies worked in tandem to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the SGM has been leveraged within the multisite church setting to advance discipleship development.

Nevertheless, the complexities surrounding communication attempts with multisite church leaders contributed to the lackluster results for both aspects of the study. The low response rate for the quantitative study indirectly impacted the number of potential participants for the second, qualitative phase of the study. Even after expanding the study to multisite

churches throughout the United States, only five churches and 68 SG members participated in the study, including 10 who opted to participate in the IDI.

Furthermore, all but one participating church shared the study opportunity with one of their campuses, further restricting the study sample size from a potential pool of 3,360 SG members. Greater buy-in and assistance from pastors and small group leaders in distributing the email recruitment letter to small group members within their church could have prevented this low response rate. It was not surprising that social media attempts, which were reflective of cold calling on a digital platform, also fell flat.

Consequently, in light of the low participant response rate and low confidence interval, one weakness of the study was that the findings were not as generalizable to larger small group members within multisite church settings. In addition, while not entirely significant, it was noteworthy that not all 68 participants answered every question, with n varying between 60 and 67, as respondents chose to skip certain questions.

Another potential weakness of the study was the omission of a multisite-based question on the IDI. An open-ended question about the uniqueness of the multisite church model and small groups could have shed additional light on the dynamic between the two concepts. However, despite the numbers, the explanatory sequential nature of this design that allowed for the qualitative in-depth interviews to follow the survey was beneficial in recording the real-life experiences of SG members. The phenomenological design and semi-structured in-depth interview style further positioned the 10 IDI participants to go beyond the surface, sharing their personal stories about the SGM's impact on their development and desire to facilitate spiritual growth with others. This was a critical element of this study, to hear directly from SG members versus the voices of SG leaders.

Embedded in the semi-structured interview style was the ability to build trust and foster a safe atmosphere of collaboration and exchange between researcher and interviewee. This allowed the researcher to witness visual cues related to articulated thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs. In addition, the interview design allowed this researcher to better understand SG participants' motivations. Roller and Lavrakas (2015) stated that "an IDI approach provides a rich, nuanced understanding of the 'thinking' (i.e., motivation) that drives behavior and attitude formation" (p. 52). This was apparent when inquiring about motivations or attitudes that influenced the initial reasons IDI participants joined the SGM (see Figure 3). This was also reflected in the participants' understanding of their role as disciple makers, and how the SGM was helping SG members fulfill that responsibility.

In addition to the quantitative and qualitative layering, other strengths of the study were the transferability of the results. The themes or codes that resulted from the triangulation of common themes or attitudes from the DSSQ, the DSIQ, and digital material on the participating churches' websites strengthened the study. The emerging concepts and themes further validated the data adding credibility to the findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

Discipleship, or the process of becoming a disciple of Christ and reproducing Christ in others, is closely related to the current study's small group ministry (SGM). The SGM is known to serve as a catalyst for discipleship development, especially within multisite churches where traditional methods of maturing believers are no longer in place. This study was designed to assess the impact of the SGM in the lives of its members within the popular multisite church setting. These churches herald a minimum of over 1,000 weekly attendees (Bird, 2015). More specifically, this study engaged active multisite SG members to examine if and how the SGM fosters discipleship development and disciple making practices in these large settings.

This chapter presents conclusions from the research findings, highlights limitations of the study, and prescribes applications and future research opportunities. The findings can also aid pastors and SGM leaders in their endeavors to see believers grow into mature disciples of Christ.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. At this stage in the research, multisite churches were generally defined as those "churches with multiple, satellite campuses united under one primary pastor, vision, and church DNA" (Edwards, 2016, p. 1). The theory that guided this study is found within Earley and Dempsey's (2013) *Disciple Making Is: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence*. This theory outlined the growth process from believer to disciple to disciple maker in a community of faith.

Research Questions

RQ1. How did multisite church small group participants describe their perceptions of the purpose of the small group ministry?

RQ2. How did multisite church small group participants describe their comfort level in walking others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the small group ministry?

RQ3. What, if any, collaboration was there between the spiritual activities embedded in the design and structure of small group sessions and the perception of discipleship development among multisite church small group participants?

RQ4. How did the combination of survey research and in-depth interviews provide a more comprehensive understanding of multisite church small group participants' desire to walk others through their journey of spiritual growth since participating in the small group ministry?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

Conclusions drawn from this mixed methods study were encouraging and prescriptive for existing pastors, small group ministry leaders, and others who desire to launch this ministry within their church. Insight gleaned from study participants affirmed many benefits of the SGM and provided opportunities for careful considerations regarding the communication of its purpose, structure, design, and training elements that speak to discipleship development. Specific conclusions are highlighted below, addressing the four research questions, followed by theoretical and practical implications for the SG ministry.

Research Conclusion One: SGM Purpose

After careful examination, this researcher concluded that the study's findings were inconclusive. A true understanding and distinction between the purpose and the by-product of the SGM activities remained unclear. The first research question inquired about the purpose of SGM. This was a foundational question designed to assess if (1) SG members' perceptions of the purpose of the SGM was aligned with the church's vision and to determine if (2) that articulated

purpose aligned with activities and benefits of the ministry, as outlined in previous research studies and literature.

There were mixed results to this question. The DSSQ suggested SG members had a clear understanding of the SGM purpose that was rooted in building communities of faith (94%), discipleship development (95%) and evangelism (60%). However, results from the DSIQ suggested greater ambiguity surrounding this topic. Selecting from pre-populated descriptors helped many SG member survey respondents identify what they believed the SGM purpose. However, IDI participants, via the DSIQ, struggled to answer this question when asked to describe the SGM purpose in their own words. Many could not recall what leaders articulated or admitted to learning of the SGM by visiting their church's website.

On the other hand, the implied impression of the SGM, or rather the benefits of participating in the SGM, was more readily and consistently articulated by IDI participants versus that of a clearly defined purpose for the ministry. It was here where concepts and impressions of the SGM aligned with language presented on participating church's websites and earlier research on the subject. For example, words and concepts like "community," "fellowship," and "growing in faith," to name a few, were often cited by IDI participants and are visible on the "Connect" or "Groups" webpage of participating churches. These same words or concepts were cited in the work of Donahue and Gowler (2014) and Lowe and Lowe (2018), each of whom emphasized spiritual formation in community, drawing upon Greek words like *koinonia* (fellowship) and *allelon* (one another) cited throughout many of the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament.

While one might infer discipleship or discipleship development from these terms, it would be a mistake to assume that these terms were interchangeable and equated to the perceived

purpose of the SGM among study participants. The DSIQ asked two questions: one asked SG

members to share the ministry's primary purpose, and the other asked for them to describe their

role as a disciple maker. It should be noted that clear descriptions of discipleship and the role of

disciple making were provided for the latter question.

Understanding the purpose, as articulated by active SG members, was also crucial to

determine if there was any truth to the criticism of the SGM. For example, while acknowledging

some benefits of the SGM, researchers like Walton (2011) and Withrow (2003) recognize that

major shortcomings of the ministry included its proclivity to downplay discipleship development

in favor of serving as a support self-help group for its members.

Evangelism, as referenced on the DSSQ as the third understood purpose of the SGM,

coupled with terms like "family," "support," and phrases like "doing life together," emerged from

the DSIQ. This was used to describe how SG members connected and actively engaged with the

lost, implying that a self-help group mindset did not apply to these study participants. More

specifically, this researcher concluded that a self-help nature was neither directly nor indirectly

articulated or inferred from among study participants. Therefore, this common pitfall of the SGM

did not align with those particular criticisms of previous researchers.

Research Conclusion Two: Comfort Level & Disciple Making

Perhaps one of the driving forces for the popularity of the SGM within large ministries is

that it has been widely recognized as a vehicle for DM in multisite churches, per researchers like

Shelby (2011) and Frye (2011). The SGM has prevalent usage by industry leaders like Bill

Search, Chriss Surratt, and Steve Gladden-each of whom provide oversight for the SGM in their

church. It was, therefore, important to assess if active SG members within multisite churches

agreed that this ministry was an effective tool for disciple making.

Results favored this opinion and were conclusive from both DSSQ responses and IDI participants. Increased comfortability in praying for and walking with others on their spiritual journey was confirmed by over 60% of DSSQ respondents. It was also cited explicitly by IDI participants who reportedly shared their experiences reaching others through evangelistic, faith-based sharing, and general outreach activities. Furthermore, responses from IDI participants implied that their attitudes, behaviors, and motivations for discipling others were closely related to their understanding of their role as disciple makers as a mandate within the Great Commission. For example, a few notable and very specific IDI participant responses included the below:

1. Our job is to share the good news (IDI SG Participant #7).
2. We are trying to take, always trying to take others through, you know, reaching out to them, teaching them the gospel of Christ, (IDI SG Participant #10).
3. [I must be] ready to make disciples, to introduce somebody to Christ, (IDI SG Participant #2).
4. I have a passion for helping people get closer to Christ and build a relationship (IDI SG Participant #2).

Therefore, this researcher concluded from survey findings and the real-life attitudes and beliefs on disciple making from IDI participants that the SGM has effectively empowered disciple making (DM) activities. Participants learned to open up more, share their faith, pray, and invite others to Christ, their church, and their SG gathering.

The data indeed underscored SG participants' understanding of their role and responsibility associated with the Great Commission. However, what remained unclear, something that may be more closely related to the structure of the SGM covered in research question three below, was the existence of a specified path for effective DM referenced throughout Chapter 2. Consequently, it is not known if SG participants or the SGM as a whole identified such steps to help members determine if someone is moving along a trajectory of

growth. This process should develop the believer to disciple and from disciple-to-disciple maker, stages advocated by Earley and Dempsey (2013) in their book, *Disciple Making Is: How to Live the Great Commission with Passion and Confidence.*

Nevertheless, this researcher concluded that (1) the SGM was instrumental in fostering a desire to disciple others, (2) the desire for DM increased over time with long-term participation in the SGM, and (3) the SGM created an intimate type of family environment reminiscent of house churches in the New Testament. In those settings, believers had all things in common, grew together, and shared their faith with the lost. With that said, it can be concluded that these findings are congruent with earlier research conducted by Walton (2011), Atkinson and Comiskey (2014), Bird (2015), and Jackson (2019).

Furthermore, the DSSQ revealed that (4) without additional information from IDI participants, the attitudes and beliefs surrounding the reproductive element of disciple making, manifested through the future desire to lead a SG, remained somewhat ambivalent, with 40% of year one and 38% of year five participants having a neutral or indifferent attitude towards the idea. Earlier research is also unclear on this issue, with little to no data relating to the desire to reproduce disciples specifically and directly through launching new small groups among SG members. Perhaps this is another area worthy of further research, highlighted later in the chapter.

Research Conclusion Three: Personal Growth

This researcher concluded that elements of the SGM's structure and design are conducive for personal and spiritual growth. Individual growth in one's walk with the Lord-spending more time reading the Bible and meditating on God's word, increased time of prayer, and having the flexibility to help shape the direction of activities within the small group-were pillars that supported spiritual growth among study participants.

The very nature of the SGM served as a catalyst for this dynamic, moving participants to go beyond hearing to intentionally acting out God's Word within themselves and others. Robert Withrow's early research suggested a powerful connection between the SGM and individuals' growth with God and others. His work cited that 90% of participants felt closer to God, and 84% experienced more meaningful time with the Bible (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Similarly, Howard (2018), Beagles (2012), Pettit (2008), and (Lowe and Lowe, 2018) affirmed that the SGM fostered growth through spiritual formation in community for individual and corporate SG members.

This study aligned with the above as well as Lisa Withrow's (2003) research that distinguished between private and personal growth. She stated that a potential danger of the SGM existed if it emphasizes more private versus personal growth, where "private growth is distant and separate while personal growth does not exclude the participation of other people in one's spiritual maturation" (p. 142). This dynamic was present within this study, as SG members reported having the option to determine the curricula or course of study, take turns in leading various devotionals and other fellowship activities, and encourage and pray for each other.

The communal discourse and exchange that occurred within the group indirectly impacted individual growth among members. Research also concluded that members seemed to thrive the best with an open group design and favored curricula that were exclusive of time restraints. This led to increased continuity and engagement between members.

Lastly, this study found that the structure and activities embedded in the SGM unite with study participants' understanding of their role and responsibility to help others grow. This resembles Yount's (2010) Discipler's Model, where the Word of God is balanced with understanding the needs of others, and these foundational stones provided the support necessary

for both internal, individual growth and collective growth, symbolically captured as the capstone of this model.

Research Conclusion Four: Overall Impact & General Perceptions

This study confirmed that the SGM could be an effective discipleship development tool. Perceptions surrounding its impact were overwhelmingly positive. It was said to be life-changing, impactful, and a blessing among study participants. It bridged a gap and filled a desire for belonging; it provided support; it created extended families for participants and promoted evangelism and discipling of others in the process. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the design's effect on SG member growth, as highlighted above. Members welcomed a democratic approach to the SGM and enjoyed taking ownership where possible (i.e., voting on the next book, Bible study, curricula, or next outing) to shape their SG experiences. It is the culmination of these components that support earlier research on the overall effectiveness of the SGM.

One final conclusion on overall impact and general perceptions were that SG leaders wanted to feel like they are positioned and empowered to lead effectively. The lack of references to specific training methods, particularly from IDI participants, is concerning and can ultimately become a stumbling block for people who might otherwise desire to transition into a SG leader role by launching a SG of their own.

<div align="center">

Implications, and Applications

</div>

At the center of this study was the intersection of multisite church usage of the SGM to foster discipleship development. Existing literature painted a broad stroke concerning the potential impact of the small group ministry. Research has yet to be investigated into the potential of the SGM within the multisite church community, especially as it relates to discipleship development. Bird's (2014) and (2015) *Leadership Network / Generis Multisite*

Church Scorecard provided an in-depth look into the internal structure, church planting or campus launch processes, and growth dynamics associated with the multisite church. However, it did not address how these churches elevate and prioritize their discipleship development methodologies.

Furthermore, previous literature like Edwards (2016) revealed the multisite church model is dynamic and has continued to evolve over the past decade, shifting architectural variables embedded within its design like that of leadership autonomy between the senior pastor and campus leaders. The complexities of its size, with tens of thousands in attendance each week across multiple geographies, have also come into question with critics wondering how church leaders focus on discipleship versus church growth and attendance.

Researchers like Ferguson (1997), McConnell (2009), and Brenda (2012) explored general discipleship practices, church leadership development, and the personal development of multisite campus pastors, respectively. Despite these valuable contributions to the study of multisite churches, their work nevertheless failed to connect the dots between discipleship development through the SGM and multisite churches.

Lastly, while absent of the multisite church dynamic, Robert Wuthnow's late 90s research emphasized the value of the small group ministry structure, highlighting results similar to this study. Specifically, his research revealed that, with regard to the small group ministry, "nearly 50% of respondents articulated an increased desire for spiritual growth and 55% of respondents revealed how their participation in the small group encouraged them to share their faith with others. Lastly, 69% expressed an increased desire to serve others" (Walton, 2011, p. 106).

As noted above, the purpose of this study was to examine the intersection between discipleship development through small groups within multisite churches. When reviewing this study's results, it can be implied that multisite church leaders have recognized the potential and have made some progress regarding the impact of the SGM. Personal growth of SG members and discipleship development were evidenced by a broad range of balanced activities. The SGM is not perfect, and will continue to ebb and flow, shifting with the changes needs of its members and multisite church leader expectations. However, even in the absence of a universal understanding of its purpose among participants, the SGM appeared vital to the spiritual health of multisite churchgoers and SG members in this study.

It can be said that having a SGM in place is the first step in cultivating community and spiritual growth. Adjustments are needed however to address some design and structural components of the SGM that currently have the potential to thwart growth and minimize desired outcomes. Examples of the latter include increased training opportunities for SG leaders, limited use of semesters/time restraints associated with certain curricula, and equipping all SG leaders to facilitate a range of topics so that SG members will not have to leave one group and go to another to access desired topics. Cumulative changes in these three areas can eliminate or minimize disrupted learning and spiritual growth among SG members, increase continuity and stability, further empower SG leaders to facilitate spiritual growth, and potentially increase desires for SG members to launch a small group of their own.

Research Limitations

One of the apparent limitations of the study is its low participant rate which inhibits its ability to reflect the attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs of larger small group audiences. According to Bird (2015) and Wentz (2022), there is an estimated 10,000 plus multisite churches in the United

States and Canada with close to 5 million attendees each week. The findings from among 58 small group participants may not be a true representation of the hundreds of thousands of individuals currently participating in their multisite church's small group ministry.

In addition, this study may have even further limitations *within* participating multisite churches, since many of the churches likely shared the opportunity to participate in the study with one of their campuses. This resulted from the complex internal structure and design of the multisite church model as a whole. Each ministry has a separate campus pastor and separate small group leader who has the autonomy to make decisions about their respective campus. The lack of one primary point of contact for the ministry can complicate outreach efforts and buy-in opportunities for leaders.

For example, one ministry has over 20 campuses, and instead of being directed to a senior leader over the SGM, this researcher had to send individual communications to each of the 20 different SG leaders to secure their buy-in for the study. Not only was this extremely time-consuming, but it was also exhaustive and duplicative. In light of this, it would have been better suited to have selected one multisite church and secure buy-in from the senior pastor with directives and support for sending the study opportunity to all small group members, regardless of their geography or campus affiliation. It would have been of greater benefit if this researcher could have completed the steps above with up to three multisite churches to enhance the triangulation analysis of study findings.

Furthermore, this study did not intend to compare the experiences of traditional means of spiritual growth present in single-location ministries. Therefore, this study is limited in determining if one means of spiritual development is better suited to fostering discipleship development over the other. More specifically, this study did not seek to understand if or how

regular Sunday School or Bible Study attendance and participation would produce similar or variant findings than that of the SGM used within multisite churches.

Further Research

As stated earlier, primarily in the first and second chapters, discipleship development is a mandate that had not changed since the days when Jesus Christ walked the earth. The Great Commission, articulated in Matthew 28:16-20, remains a clarion call from God to each of his disciples to further the gospel message until everyone has heard of its transformative power and saving grace.

How churches accomplish this goal in an ever-evolving, digitally advanced world continues to plague church leaders who are anxious to reach the lost and facilitate growth for their members. Nevertheless, churches continue to struggle with defining the size and scope of the discipleship development task (Saunders, 2009). This study concluded that certain ingredients position the SGM to foster spiritual growth, build communities of faith, and advance elements of discipleship development. Additional research is needed to ascertain how multisite churches define discipleship development and what other methodologies multisite churches can use to assess discipleship development success.

Furthermore, it might be of interest to do a comparative study between campuses within the same multisite church. In light of various levels of autonomy attributed to campus pastors, it may be worthwhile to assess if one campus can yield stronger results than that of others, for senior church leaders to identify any best practices that can be leveraged across multiple geographies. In this vein, further research may be warranted between an in-person SGM and those exclusive to the virtual community through online small groups.

The ambiguity that lingers around the reproductive aspect of disciple making also warrants additional research. For example, does reproduction equate to salvation of souls, length of time in the small group ministry, the number of active SG members, volunteerism and giving, or the transition of small group members into leaders who launch their own small group? More importantly, does this ambivalence lay with the commitment to lead the SG from among SG members or with the vision articulated about the ministry by church leaders. Moreover, what guide does church leaders have to determine the path from salvation to bearing fruit (Earley & Dempsey, 2013)?

Lastly, can a comparative element between large megachurches and multisite churches provide an interesting study? The commonality of having to minister, foster spiritual growth, create community, and equip mature believers to become disciples for Christ for larger church audiences, a key component of the SGM in general, is a common denominator between megachurches and multisite churches worth investigating.

Summary

Both theological and theoretical literature supports the SGM model as a potential vehicle for discipleship development. Initial studies on the use of the SGM within multisite churches is promising in that there appears to be alignment with some of what Christ charged His disciples to do through the mandate of the Great Commission. The positive takeaways from this study confirmed that, on a fundamental level, the SGM provides the both-and concept that lends well to disciple making in that it fosters internal growth and external outreach to win the lost. It is intimate and personal, yet corporate and effective. It promotes growing with God and others. It is relational and builds the self-efficacy of its members, empowering them to do more; to go beyond themselves into the world to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ with

others. Furthermore, it has duplicative or reproductive potential as SG members walk with others on their spiritual journey and, at least for some, position them to launch out on their own to lead a SG in the future.

What would increase the potency of this ministry? Design and structural components rooted in a clear vision and purpose of the ministry so clearly articulated that SG members (albeit church members as a whole) can recite it in their sleep. This is where leaders need to pay attention. This is where adjustments can be made. This is how multisite church leaders can maximize the moment of the SG movement and ensure its future success. This vision should ultimately encourage and position SG members for spiritual reproduction in Christ. It should expand beyond personal growth and evangelistic efforts void of a clear path to guide others from conversion. The beginning of discipleship development is to produce disciples of Christ. Moreover, like Jesus, church leaders need to invest more time and effort in developing disciples so that when it is their time to go out "two-by-two," they are fully equipped to do so in a manner that glorifies God and bears much fruit.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Initial IRB Approval Notification

Date: 4-16-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY20-21-906
Title: Small Group Participant Perceptions of Discipleship Development in Multisite Churches: A Mixed Methods Study
Creation Date: 5-11-2021
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Risha Bailey
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type		Review Type		Decision	
Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB
Submission Type	Modification	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB

Key Study Contacts

Member		Role		Contact	
Member	Gary Bredfeldt	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	████████
Member	Risha Bailey	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	████████
Member	Risha Bailey	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	████████

Appendix B

Initial Small Group Participant Email Recruitment Letter

Greetings,

As a doctoral student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Christian Education, Ministry Leadership. The purpose of my research is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. I am writing at this time, with great pleasure, to share this opportunity with you and to formally invite you to participate in my study. Below are a few helpful details for you to consider.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in a small group ministry within a multisite church located along the East Coast of the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Study participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an online, ten-minute survey. A select number of study participants will also be invited to participate in an audio-and video-recorded, 30-minute interview via Zoom. Please note that all interview participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy via email. Participation in the survey alone is anonymous unless you choose to provide your email address to be considered for an interview.
Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of the interview, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here https://bit.ly/Discipleship_SmallGroupSurvey.

A consent form is included in the survey link for your review. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to only participate in the anonymous survey, please click the link above to proceed to the survey after reading the enclosed consent form. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

If you choose to participate the interview as well, please provide your email address at the end of the survey. A consent form will be sent to you via email, and you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview. Please review the consent document in its entirety, sign it, and return it to me via the email listed below within two weeks of receipt of this email.

Sincerely,

Risha D. Bailey
Doctoral Candidate,
Liberty University School of Divinity

Appendix C

Small Group Participant Social Media Recruitment Post

ATTENTION LinkedIN/FACEBOOK FRIENDS:

I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in a small group ministry within a multisite church located along the East Coast of the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a ten-minute online survey. A select number of study participants will also be invited to participate in a 30-minute interview. All interview participants and will have the opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy via email. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please inbox me now and I will follow up with you. If you choose to only participate in the anonymous survey, you will be sent a copy of the consent document and a link to the survey. If you choose to participate the interview as well, please provide your email address at the end of the survey. A consent form will be sent to you via email, and you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview.

Appendix D

Small Group Participant Email Follow-Up

Greetings:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. Two weeks ago, an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to verify your interest as a participant in the study. The deadline for participation is TBD.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an online, ten-minute survey via Qualtrics. A select number of study participants will also be invited to participate in an audio- and video-recorded, 30-minute interview via Zoom. Please note that all interview participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy via email. Participation in the survey alone is anonymous unless you choose to provide your email address to be considered for an interview. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of the interview, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here https://bit.ly/Discipleship_SmallGroupSurvey.

A consent form is included in the survey link for your review. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to only participate in the anonymous survey, please click the link above to proceed to the survey after reading the attached consent form. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

If you choose to participate in the interview as well, please provide your email address at the end of the survey. A consent form will be sent to you via email, and you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview. Please review the consent document in its entirety, sign it, and return it to me via the email listed below within two weeks of receipt of this email.

Sincerely,

Risha D. Bailey
Doctoral Candidate,
Liberty University School of Divinity

Appendix E

Initial Discipleship & Small Group Survey Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Small Group Participant Perceptions of Discipleship Development in Multisite Churches: A Mixed Methods Study
Principal Investigator: Risha D. Bailey, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in the small group ministry of a multisite church located along the East Coast of the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete an online, 10-minute survey via Qualtrics.
2. If you would like to be considered for the interview portion of this study, you will be asked to provide an email address at the end of survey. A select number of participants will be invited to participate in a 30-minute, audio- and video-recorded interview via Zoom.
3. Review your interview transcripts for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society may include providing insight into the effectiveness of the small group ministry as a viable means of developing disciples for Christ within the unique multisite church setting.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Published reports will not include any identifying information about your ministry. Research records will be stored securely for no more than three years, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Survey responses will be anonymous unless you choose to provide your email address to opt into the interview portion of the study. In this case, the survey would be confidential.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. A numerical code will be used to preserve the confidentiality of your ministry throughout the study. Your interview responses as a multisite church small group participant will also remain confidential through the use of a numerical code.
- All interviews with selected small group participants will be conducted virtually via a password-protected Zoom meeting. The video recording from this meeting will coincide with your previously assigned numerical code to protect your privacy.
- Data, including your survey and interview responses, will be stored on a password-protected computer and may be used in future educational/teaching presentations. All electronic files and records will be deleted after three years.
- All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey (if you only complete the survey) or any time during or after the interview without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study and only participate in the survey, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study and participate in both the survey and interview, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Risha D. Bailey. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Bredfeldt, at ████████████████ .

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

Appendix F

Initial Discipleship & Small Group Interview Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Small Group Participant Perceptions of Discipleship Development in Multisite Churches: A Mixed Methods Study
Principal Investigator: Risha D. Bailey, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity

<div align="center">

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study
</div>

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in the small group ministry of a multisite church located along the East Coast of the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

<div align="center">

What is the study about and why is it being done?
</div>

The purpose of the study is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches.

<div align="center">

What will happen if you take part in this study?
</div>

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
4. Complete an online, 10-minute survey via Qualtrics.
5. If you would like to be considered for the interview portion of this study, you will be asked to provide an email address at the end of survey. A select number of participants will be invited to participate in a 30-minute, audio- and video-recorded interview via Zoom.
6. Review your interview transcripts for accuracy.

<div align="center">

How could you or others benefit from this study?
</div>

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society may include providing insight into the effectiveness of the small group ministry as a viable means of developing disciples for Christ within the unique multisite church setting.

<div align="center">

What risks might you experience from being in this study?
</div>

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Published reports will not include any identifying information about your ministry. Research records will be stored securely for no more than three years, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Survey responses will be anonymous unless you choose to provide your email address to opt into the interview portion of the study. In this case, the survey would be confidential.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. A numerical code will be used to preserve the confidentiality of your ministry throughout the study. Your interview responses as a multisite church small group participant will also remain confidential through the use of a numerical code.
- All interviews with selected small group participants will be conducted virtually via a password-protected Zoom meeting. The video recording from this meeting will coincide with your previously assigned numerical code to protect your privacy.
- Data, including your survey and interview responses, will be stored on a password-protected computer and may be used in future educational/teaching presentations. All electronic files and records will be deleted after three years.
- All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey (if you only complete the survey) or any time during or after the interview without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study and only participate in the survey, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study and participate in both the survey and interview, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Risha D. Bailey. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Bredfeldt, at ████████████████ .

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____   _____
Printed Subject Name   Signature & Date

Appendix G

Modified IRB Approval Notification

Date: 11-20-2021

IRB #: IRB-FY20-21-906
Title: Small Group Participant Perceptions of Discipleship Development in Multisite Churches: A Mixed Methods Study
Creation Date: 5-11-2021
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Risha Bailey
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type		Review Type		Decision	
Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB
Submission Type	Modification	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB

Key Study Contacts

Member		Role		Contact
Member	Gary Bredfeldt	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact
Member	Risha Bailey	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact
Member	Risha Bailey	Role	Primary Contact	Contact

Appendix H

Modified Small Group Participant Email Recruitment Letter

Greetings!

As a doctoral student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Christian Education, Ministry Leadership. The purpose of my research is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. I am writing at this time, with great pleasure, to share this opportunity with you and to formally invite you to participate in my study. Below are a few helpful details for you to consider.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in a small group ministry within a multisite church anywhere within the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Study participants, if willing, will be asked to complete an online, ten-minute survey. A select number of study participants will also be invited to participate in an audio-and video-recorded, 30-minute interview via Zoom. Please note that all interview participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy via email. Participation in the survey alone is anonymous unless you choose to provide your email address to be considered for an interview. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of the interview, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here- https://bit.ly/Discipleship_SmallGroupSurvey

A consent form is included in the link above. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to only participate in the anonymous survey, please click the link above to proceed to the survey after reading the attached consent form. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

If you choose to participate the interview as well, please provide your email address at the end of the survey. A consent form will be sent to you via email, and you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview. Please review the consent document in its entirety, sign it, and return it to me via the email listed below within two weeks of receipt of this email.

Sincerely,

Risha D. Bailey
Doctoral Candidate,
Liberty University School of Divinity

Appendix I

Modified Small Group Social Media Recruitment Post

ATTENTION LinkedIN/FACEBOOK FRIENDS:

I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in a small group ministry within a multisite church located anywhere within the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a ten-minute online survey. A select number of study participants will also be invited to participate in a 30-minute interview. All interview participants and will have the opportunity to review their interview transcript for accuracy via email. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please inbox me now and I will follow up with you. If you choose to only participate in the anonymous survey, you will be sent a copy of the consent document and a link to the survey. If you choose to participate the interview as well, please provide your email address at the end of the survey. A consent form will be sent to you via email, and you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to the interview.

Appendix J

Modified Discipleship & Small Group Survey Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Small Group Participant Perceptions of Discipleship Development in Multisite Churches: A Mixed Methods Study
Principal Investigator: Risha D. Bailey, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in the small group ministry of a multisite church located anywhere within the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to discover small group participants' experiences and perceptions of their development as Christ's disciples by examining the structure, design, and impact of their participation in small groups within multisite churches.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
7. Complete an online, 10-minute survey via Qualtrics.
8. If you would like to be considered for the interview portion of this study, you will be asked to provide an email address at the end of survey. A select number of participants will be invited to participate in a 30-minute, audio- and video-recorded interview via Zoom.
9. Review your interview transcripts for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society may include providing insight into the effectiveness of the small group ministry as a viable means of developing disciples for Christ within the unique multisite church setting.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept confidential. Published reports will not include any identifying information about your ministry. Research records will be stored securely for no more than three years, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Survey responses will be anonymous unless you choose to provide your email address to opt into the interview portion of the study. In this case, the survey would be confidential.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. A numerical code will be used to preserve the confidentiality of your ministry throughout the study. Your interview responses as a multisite church small group participant will also remain confidential through the use of a numerical code.
- All interviews with selected small group participants will be conducted virtually via a password-protected Zoom meeting. The video recording from this meeting will coincide with your previously assigned numerical code to protect your privacy.
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Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey (if you only complete the survey) or any time during or after the interview without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study and only participate in the survey, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

If you choose to withdraw from the study and participate in both the survey and interview, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Risha D. Bailey. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at xxx-xxx-xxxx. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gary Bredfeldt, at ███████████████ .

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

Appendix K

Modified Discipleship & Small Group Interview Consent Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Small Group Participant Perceptions of Discipleship Development in Multisite Churches: A Mixed Methods Study
Principal Investigator: Risha D. Bailey, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and actively participating in the small group ministry of a multisite church located anywhere within the United States that has at least one additional campus and a minimum of 1,000 average weekly attendees. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

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What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
10. Complete an online, 10-minute survey via Qualtrics.
11. If you would like to be considered for the interview portion of this study, you will be asked to provide an email address at the end of survey. A select number of participants will be invited to participate in a 30-minute, audio- and video-recorded interview via Zoom.
12. Review your interview transcripts for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix L

Discipleship and Small Group Survey Questionnaire (DSSQ)

Eligibility Question (multiple choice- yes or no question): I certify that I am at least 18 years of age or older and an active participant in my church's small group ministry.

-Logic Question. If the respondent answers "yes," they can proceed to complete the below questions.

Instructions: Please use the below scale to indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

1- Strongly Agree
2- Agree
3- Somewhat Agree
4- Somewhat Disagree
5- Disagree
6- Strongly Disagree

Survey Questions:

1. I was excited to join my church's small group ministry.
2. I like the structure of my small group.
3. I like the meeting frequency of my small group.
4. I believe that my participation in the small group is helping me to grow into a disciple of Christ.
5. I understand the primary purpose of my church's small group ministry is to build communities of faith.
6. I understand the primary purpose of my church's small group ministry is to develop disciples of Christ.
7. I understand that my church uses the small group ministry as an evangelism tool to share the gospel message with non-believers.
8. We regularly review my pastor's sermons and/or other biblical study guides during my small group sessions.
9. The structure and design of my small group is conducive for my spiritual growth and development.
10. We have an open design where my small group leader and/or members decide what the group will study.
11. My participation in the small group ministry has helped me learn more about and apply God's Word to my daily life.
12. I am encouraged to invite others, including non-believers, to my small group.
13. My small group leader and fellow members help me in my walk with God.
14. I feel comfortable walking others through their spiritual journey as they grow in God since joining my small group.
15. My comfortability in telling others about God's Word has increased since joining the small group ministry.
16. My comfortability in praying for others has increased since joining the small group ministry.
17. My prayer life has grown since joining the small group ministry.

18. My quiet time of meditating and seeking the Lord has grown since joining the small group ministry.
19. I understand and have applied principles of fasting more since joining my small group.
20. Participation in my church's small group ministry has helped my understanding of the Great Commission and has encouraged me to go and make disciples of others.
21. I would like to lead a small group of my own in the future.
22. I rarely shared my faith with others before joining the small group ministry at my church.
23. Participation in my small group is primarily driven by a desire to connect with others.
24. My small group caters more to the development of its members than inviting new and/or non-believers to join the group.
25. I don't believe I would be growing into a disciple of Christ without my participation in the small group ministry.

Demographic Questions
1. I have been an active small group member for less than one year.
2. I have been an active small group member for one to three years.
3. I have been an active small group member for three to five years.
4. I have been an active small group member for five or more years.
5. My small group is always open for other individuals to join throughout the year.
6. My small group is closed to a maximum number of individuals for a specific period of time throughout the year.
7. We have coed small groups.
8. We have small groups based on certain themes (marriages, singlehood, walking in forgiveness, etc.).
9. We have small groups based on age, gender, and/or geographic location.
10. I have the opportunity to join more than one small group at my church throughout the year.
11. I would be willing to participate in an individual interview as part of the second half of this study. *Logic Question: if the respondent answers "Yes," they must complete the below:
Please provide your email address so that I may contact you to schedule your private, individual interview for the second half of this study. Please note that by providing your email address here in this survey, your survey will no longer be anonymous. Your participation will be confidential, and your responses will remain confidential through the use of a numerical code. If you choose to participate in the interview, I will send you a consent form to sign via email. Please sign and return the consent to me via email to confirm you are willing to participate in the interview. I will then schedule a time for the interview.

Appendix M

Discipleship & Small Group Interview Questionnaire (DSIQ)

1. What inspired you to join the small group ministry at your church?
2. What have your leaders communicated as the main purpose of the small group ministry at your church?
3. What impact, if any, has your participation in the small group ministry had in fostering discipleship development in your life?
4. What, if any, spiritual activities occur during your small group session?
5. What is your understanding of your role as a disciple maker of Christ, and how is this connected to your participation in the small group ministry at your church?
6. How would you describe your overall experiences as a small group member?
7. What is one word you would use to describe your experiences as a small group member?
8. What, if anything, would you change about the structure and/or design of the small group ministry at your church?