LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHURCH REVITALIZATION

IN COASTAL NORTH CAROLINA

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Paolo Engle Santos

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

Pastors and ministry leaders share the important responsibilities of church growth and revitalization. This research focused on overcoming decline and moving towards a season of strength and multiplication. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The theory guiding this study was Rainer's (2020) central thesis about revived churches, which suggests that churches must adapt to cultural shifts and actively engage with the changing world. The study sought to gain insights into the perspectives and mindsets of full-time pastors and ministry leaders regarding numerical expansion, spiritual awakening, leadership, digital technologies, the Holy Spirit, and their lived experiences regarding church health. This study aimed to enhance the understanding of experiences within the wider community by complementing the existing research conducted on the general population. This research emphasized the significance of maintaining a healthy church by supplementing the current investigations with research on a more local context. A qualitative research design utilizing phenomenological methods was used to achieve this. The research involved interviews with a selected sample of pastors and ministry leaders. Qualitative data analysis was conducted on the collected data to obtain insights into the lived experiences of pastors and ministry leaders regarding how they sustain a healthy and revitalized church.

Keywords: church growth, church revitalization, Christian leadership

Dedication

This work is dedicated to God. To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. To my parents, Marilu Engle and Jon Scarborough, thank you for your support and life lessons.

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Pastor Bobby Owings for his invaluable guidance, initiative, and encouragement throughout my Doctor of Education degree. I am also grateful to Pastor John McGough, Pastor Scot Painter, Pastor Nick Adams, and Pastor Nathan Swartz for their prayers, support, and encouragement. I would also like to thank my fellow CLED classmates for their assistance in making my rough drafts more coherent. Heartfelt thanks go to Dr. Gary Bredfeldt, Dr. Jeffrey Davis, Dr. Lucas Farmer, Dr. Brian Pinzer, and Dr. James Wood for their guidance and support. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Dr. Melody Smith for her valuable time, suggestions, and uplifting encouragement.

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List of Abbreviations

Annual Church Profile (ACP)

Audio/Video (AV)

Emotional Quotient (EQ)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ)

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)

New American Standard Bible (NASB)

North Carolina (NC)

Research Question (RQ)

Situational Leadership II (SLII)

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The New Testament emphasizes the significance of expanding the community of believers during the early church (Goodhew, 2016; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Acts 2:42-47). In today's increasingly complicated and financially uncertain world, it is crucial for Christian leaders to be aware of their church's culture and develop effective strategies that foster a positive environment (Chand, 2010; Goleman et al., 2013). However, many church leaders struggle to understand a thriving church's key attributes and how to achieve them. (Dever, 2013).

Southern Baptist churches have faced a health crisis for many years (Henard, 2015). The focus of revitalization is to honor God by returning churches to their mission of making disciples and impacting those who are lost (N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022). Today's believers must evaluate their ministries and refocus on becoming a healthy church that follows God's purpose (N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022). By doing so, Christians can ensure that church communities thrive and fulfill their intended purpose. Chapter One of this study offers a framework that covers various perspectives on approaching church growth and revitalization. It provides a brief background on the problem and a summary of relevant literature, including theological, historical, sociological, and theoretical contexts. The problem addressed in this study and its purpose will be described. Additionally, key terms, assumptions, and delimiting factors will be presented to establish the framework for the study.

Background to the Problem

Efforts are currently underway to rejuvenate churches and enable them to fulfill their divine mission of propagating God's love and nurturing disciples in accordance with Haggai 1:5

(N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022). This verse emphasizes the significance of reflecting on one's actions and making changes where necessary. The example of the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1-7 warns about the dangers of losing one's fervor and efficacy in ministry and underscores the need for reform to rekindle the enthusiasm and impact of spiritual endeavors (Mohler, 2015). This section will discuss the background of the topic of church growth and revitalization as it relates to the study's theological, historical, sociological, and theoretical contexts.

Theological Context

Although there is a general concern about church growth and decline, theological reflection on the topic is not as widespread (Goodhew, 2016). The International Congress of World Evangelization held in Lausanne in 1974 significantly impacted the development of church growth theology (Rainer, 1993). Additionally, a systematic approach to church growth theology can be applied to major doctrinal themes in the Bible (Rainer, 1993). On the other hand, decline theology assumes that church growth is impossible and unnecessary (Goodhew, 2016). Despite the influence of decline theology on theologians and churches, Goodhew (2016) highlights various instances of numerical growth in the church. These include 3,000 conversions on Pentecost, 5,000 men being converted, many priests in Jerusalem becoming obedient, a great crowd being converted in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas making many disciples in Derbe, many Greeks converting in Thessalonica, and many who heard Paul in Corinth believing and being baptized (Goodhew, 2016; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Acts 2:41, 4:4, 6:7, 11:24, 14:21; 17:4, 18:8).

The New Testament provides guidance on how Christians should share their faith, emphasizing the importance of being ready to explain their beliefs with kindness and respect:

"but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (Goodhew, 2018; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, 1 Peter 3:15). The book of Acts documents the growth of local churches through the work of the Holy Spirit, who fosters gifts of service and healing within congregations (Goodhew, 2018). Every baptism means the faith community has expanded (Goodhew, 2018). 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:12 describes the Apostle Paul's prayers for a growing church, the motive for a growing church, and instructions for a growing church (Dever, 2013). The Apostle Paul's prayers for church growth reflect his belief that growth comes from God and his desire for the church to excel and please God: "Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more" (1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:12; Dever, 2002; Dever, 2013). The focus of revitalization is to honor God by returning churches to their mission of making disciples and impacting those who are lost (N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022).

Transformation is necessary because humanity has fallen into sin (*New American Standard Bible,* 1971/1995, 1 Peter 1:3). This process involves redemption and conformation to the image of God (Cameron, 2012; Galatians 5:22-23; John 3:5; Romans 8:29; Titus 3:5-7). The Holy Spirit renews and regenerates, and possesses divine attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence (1 Corinthians 2:10-11; Psalm 139:7; Romans 8:11; Titus 3:5). In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is introduced through plural pronouns and is present during the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2; Genesis 1:26). The Holy Spirit's power surpasses temporal dynamics, as supported by Cameron (2012) and Zechariah 4:6. The New Testament states that the Holy Spirit dwells in believers and plays a role in conversion and sanctification

(John 3:5-6; John 14:17). Paul describes the process of sanctification as transforming into the image of God (2 Corinthians 3:18). Additionally, the Holy Spirit develops Christian attributes such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Revitalization efforts aim to return churches to their mission of making disciples and impacting those who are lost as a reflection of God's love and in accordance with Haggai 1:5 (N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022). When Haggai began temple building, the word of the Lord came by the prophet saying, "Consider your ways!" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Haggai 1:5). Jesus warned the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:1-7 that they had lost their passion and effectiveness in ministry, and needed to repent and return to their initial deeds (Mohler, 2015). The Ephesian church serves as a warning of the need for reformation to address the spiritual decline and regain passion and effectiveness in ministry (Mohler, 2015).

Historical Context

According to Dreher (2017), the fragmentation of society can be attributed to the decline of the Christian religion, which has been happening for the past seven centuries. During the 14th century, a shift occurred, separating transcendent reality from material reality (Dreher, 2017). This replaced metaphysical realism with individualism, marking the beginning of the Renaissance era (Dreher, 2017). The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century resulted in the collapse of religious authority and unity, with the Roman Catholic institution losing its unifying principle (Dreher, 2017). The 18th century saw the displacement of the Christian religion by Enlightenment ideas of reason, privatized religion, and democracy (Dreher, 2017). The 19th and 20th centuries marked the Industrial Revolution and the growth of capitalism, while the present-day Sexual Revolution is accelerating the loss of the Christian religion (Dreher, 2017).

Throughout history, the growth of the Kingdom has been met with resistance from the established church (Barna, 2012). This resistance has taken various forms, including slander, ridicule, physical abuse, and even murder (Barna, 2012). Even significant events such as the Protestant Reformation and the Second Great Awakening were met with heated debate and violent opposition from the ecclesiastical community (Barna, 2012). Throughout the historical spiritual awakenings, "God not only revived Christians, He revitalized churches" (p. 80). More recent movements of faith, such as the Jesus Movement of the 1960s, were also dismissed or attacked by religious leaders (Barna, 2012).

According to Rainer (2020), revitalization "was not the buzzword it is today" (p. 80). Many writers in church communities have changed their approach from emphasizing church growth to prioritizing church health, as noted by Henard (2015). Rainer (2020) explains that revitalization is now a popular concept, even though it was not always the case.

Sociological Context

There has been a noticeable increase in churches closing in the United States due to secularization trends in American society during the 21st century (Smith, 2021). While the exact number of church closures is unknown, it is estimated that at least 7,000 churches are closing each year, which is expected to continue to rise (Rainer, 2020). Another statistic also shows that 20 churches close daily (Rainer, 2020). Most of these closures could have been prevented with better decision-making, but most chose to close (Rainer, 2020).

According to Rainer (2020), three out of four declining churches in the United States are "change-or-die churches" (p.15). However, some churches have revived themselves and continued to thrive (Rainer, 2020). This decision requires a lot of sacrifices, hard work, patience, and selflessness, as it involves putting God and the community ahead of personal interests

(Rainer, 2020). Unfortunately, even churches that initially had successful outreach programs and a strong gospel vision are experiencing declines and decay (Mohler, 2015).

According to Mohler (2015), some churches must make drastic changes to survive and continue their ministry. It is unclear when or why they lost their original passion, but rediscovering it is crucial to avoid further endangerment (Mohler, 2015). In the same way, modern believers should assess their ministries and refocus on building a healthy church that follows God's purpose (N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022). A healthy and prosperous church usually has these characteristics: a culture of sending, leaders who empower and equip, genuine community, passionate worship, disciples who make other disciples, and a focus on biblical doctrine and practice (N.C. Baptist Communications, 2022).

Over the last century, Southern Baptists have seen a decline in the number of churches per population (Mohler, 2015). In 1900, there was one Southern Baptist church for every 3,800 people in North America, but today that number has increased to one for every 6,200 (Mohler, 2015). However, in the South, the ratio is better, with one SBC church for every 2,722 people (Mohler, 2015). Unfortunately, Southern Baptist churches have been facing a health crisis for many years, as demonstrated by the Annual Church Profile (ACP) membership numbers (Ezell, 2015). Between 2007 and 2012, only 27% of reporting SBC churches experienced growth, while 43% remained plateaued and 30% declined (Ezell, 2015). This trend is not unique to Southern Baptists, as between 80% and 90% of all evangelical churches in the United States are not growing, and many are in decline (Mohler, 2015).

Theoretical Context

Organizations, like people, go through stages of growth and decline that can be measured by specific milestones and changes in their overall development and health (Trimble, 2019). This

can be illustrated effectively on a standard bell curve, as perceptions, goals, needs, and challenges change over time (Trimble, 2019). In the case of a church, its lifecycle can be divided into four quadrants: new, growth, decline, and dying (Trimble, 2019). Each quadrant presents unique challenges, requiring different leadership skills, resources, ministries, and strategies (Trimble, 2019). Understanding where a church falls on this lifecycle is crucial in comprehending its current condition (Trimble, 2019).

Mathematical models can be utilized to describe the dynamic processes of church growth (Hayward, 1999; Hayward, 2005; Nyabadza, 2008; Rogers, 2003). Hayward (1999) applied mathematical models from population modeling to model church growth. A model was developed based on the interactions between religious enthusiasts and unbelievers in which the enthusiasts recruit for a limited period (Hayward, 1999). Mathematical equations were utilized to describe an epidemic model with its spread by contact and limited infectious period (Hayward, 1999). The epidemic model was applied to church growth behaviors and the dynamic processes between church enthusiasts and non-believers (Hayward, 1999). The S-shaped behavior found in the growth of churches describes the dynamics of conversion (Hayward, 1999). Rogers (2003) observed a similar relationship in his analysis of the diffusion of agricultural innovations, the diffusion of kindergartens and of driver training among schools, and the spread of an antibiotic drug among doctors. Rogers (2003) observed an S-shaped adoption rate over time, indicating that diffusion is a general process independent of place, culture, the type of innovation, and the adopters.

Hayward (2005) examined the long-term effect of births, deaths, and reversion from the church. Not everyone in the church community is involved in activities that promote new member recruitment (Hayward, 2005). The church enthusiasts involved in the recruitment

process only do so for a limited time after their conversion (Hayward, 2005). There is an equilibrium between their efforts to reproduce themselves and the church's losses (Hayward, 2005). Church growth and decline are determined by a reproduction potential and whether it is above or below an extinction threshold (Hayward, 2005). According to Hayward (2005), church decline and extinction are due to an inadequate reproduction potential, instead of excessive losses from the church.

Nyabadza (2008) also presented a mathematical model using the church reproduction potential. The model incorporates exposure before conversion, internal revival, and restoration of enthusiasm (Nyabadza, 2008). Internal revival is an important mechanism that accelerates church growth in addition to the recruitment of new members (Nyabadza, 2008). For a declining church, growth can only be achieved through internal revival so that the number of active believers will outweigh the number of inactive believers (Nyabadza, 2008).

Banks (2013) used Systems theory to describe church growth, where each individual member is simultaneously viewed as a member of the body. Denominations, religious groups, communities, and nations can be considered as super-systems (Banks, 2013). Subsystems within individual churches include administrative structure, committees, deacons, church programs, and other subgroups (Banks, 2013). Gooren (2006) utilized the Religious Market theory based on the framework that religious organizations are competing for adherents who make rational choices from available options. Pluralism and religious freedom are essential conditions in the religious market model to enable religious competition between religious organizations (Gooren, 2006). Stoll and Petersen (2008) contend that churches grow and decline due to the difference in their resource levels, the extensiveness of their programs, and their recruitment efforts. Additionally, the Rational Choice theory can be utilized as a framework where churches are viewed as

religious firms and individuals as religious consumers (Stoll & Petersen, 2008). Religious firms

attract religious consumers by offering products and services that are competitive with other

firms in a market economy (Stoll & Petersen, 2008). Furthermore, competing theories on the

prevalence of religious decline consist of traditional theories of secularization, which link decline

to changes in income, education, industrialization, urbanization, and family life (Franck &

Iannaccone, 2014).

Having competent leaders is crucial for the local church to thrive within the community

(Addai-Duah et al., 2019; Mills, 2016; Miner & Bickerton, 2020; Momeny & Gourgues, 2020).

Keta and Lao (2020) studied how leadership theories can be applied in church settings,

specifically the full-range leadership theory by Bernard Bass and servant leadership by Robert

Greenleaf. Goleman et al. (2013) explored how emotional intelligence can help organizations

overcome flat growth and improve self-awareness. Emotional intelligence is now recognized

beyond the business world and is highly valued in universities, medical schools, professional

training programs, and professional coaches (Goleman et al., 2013). Unfortunately, many

struggling church leaders lack emotional intelligence (Malphurs, 2018). Eckhardt and Wagner

(2017) discuss how Christian leaders have a growing interest in the Holy Spirit, Christian unity,

spiritual warfare, revivals, and power evangelism. Francis et al. (2015) studied declining and

growing churches within the Diocese of Chester to determine the relationship between church

growth and the psychological type profile of church leaders. Psychological type theory may be

useful in predicting patterns of church growth and decline across different global regions and

contexts (Francis et al., 2015).

Researcher's Relationship to the Problem

This researcher attended a Southern Baptist church in coastal North Carolina five years ago, sparking his interest in church growth and revitalization. He became involved in various ministries and eventually became a deacon. Before that time, this researcher studied chemistry and physics and obtained a master's in business administration. He worked as a laboratory professional with a broad range of experience collaborating with multiple stakeholders to meet business objectives. He gained expertise in ensuring adherence to organizational requirements while streamlining operational activities through his work in a forensic drug testing facility. This researcher's interest in growth and flourishing shifted from secular institutions to more spiritual endeavors. This researcher's scientific background provides a distinctive viewpoint on the subject of church health.

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Statement of the Problem

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Church growth can be approached from the perspective of evangelism, discipleship, church membership, church ratios, lay ministry, organic growth, trends among the world's largest churches, church planting, technology, and the Holy Spirit (Wagner et al., 1986). Challenges are associated with establishing Christian communities in an increasingly secular and post-Christian society (Paas, 2016). Institutions such as Barna and the Pew Research Center conduct studies to gain insights on trends regarding the American public. Barna seeks to inform decision-makers so that they understand the reality of a post-truth society and know what to do (Barna, 2018). The Pew Research Center utilizes the American Trends Panel survey methodology that involves a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults who participate in self-administered web surveys (Walker & Matsa, 2021). The changes toward secularization that have been happening in American society during the 21st century are

continuing without any indication of slowing down (Smith, 2021). As the current trends of secularization and individualism continue, the average American will more closely resemble religious nonaffiliates (McCaffree, 2017).

It is important to determine the extent to which recommendations in the North American context are applicable outside that context (Dowson & McInerney, 2005). What is happening in the broad population may not represent what is happening in specific regions and cultural pockets. Research on the history of local communities has shown that religious devotion has been a significant characteristic of American society since its establishment (Chaves, 2017). Barna (2018) recommends supplementing research in the general population with research on a more local context to better understand and compare those experiences with the broader community.

Exploring historical, analytical, and biblical approaches is crucial to better understanding church growth and revitalization in modern times. Leadership, ministry, relationship, and management skills improve as individuals begin to commit to growth (Wagner et al., 1998). It is important for struggling churches to acknowledge the necessity of significant changes and a shift in their approach to ministry, according to Mohler (2015). A thriving church conducts an honest assessment and strives for improvement under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Cook & Lawless, 2019). Church leaders must determine effective ways to increase both the spiritual maturity and the number of members in their church. This study will investigate how pastors and ministry leaders describe their experiences with church growth and revitalization.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. Church growth and

revitalization are defined as overcoming the threshold of decline and moving towards a season of strength and multiplication. Numerous factors contribute to the phenomenon, and it is valuable to reveal why it occurred. This study explored and described the phenomena according to the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders of Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The theory guiding this study was Rainer's (2020) central thesis about revived churches, which suggests that these churches opted for change in order to thrive. When faced with the decision between making significant changes in their churches or facing the possibility of demise, many church leaders and members opt for the latter (Rainer, 2020). The process of implementing changes can be difficult, slow, and often requires sacrifice (Rainer, 2020). However, it is important for churches to adapt to cultural shifts and actively engage with the changing world rather than withdrawing (Rainer, 2020).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding church growth and revitalization?

RQ2. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of leadership in church growth and revitalization?

RQ3. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role, if any, of digital technology in church growth and revitalization?

RQ4. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in church growth and revitalization?

RQ5. What are the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders related to church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

The study assumed that pastors and ministry leaders were Christians who prioritized the growth and revitalization of their church and the spiritual development of their congregations as part of their responsibilities. It was assumed that the participants come from a church that has experienced growth in both numbers and spiritual maturity, either in the past or recently. In this study, church growth was assumed as a rise of at least 10% in church attendance over the past five years. It was assumed that the evaluations made by pastors and ministry leaders regarding the growth of their churches were accurate. The study also assumed that the leadership practices of pastors and ministry leaders played a significant role in successfully reviving a declining church and increasing its numbers. Additionally, their leadership practices were assumed to impact the spiritual growth of those under their guidance.

Although it is difficult to quantify church revitalization, thriving churches were assumed to be evidence of the Holy Spirit's transformative work. Effective church leadership is demonstrated through taking responsibility, breaking down barriers to change, prioritizing discipleship, committing to prayer, addressing toxic behavior, prioritizing obedience, showing sacrifice, serving others, and maintaining meaningful membership (Rainer, 2020).

Delimitations of the Research Design

Delimitations are a way to indicate to the reader how the researcher narrowed their study's scope (Roberts, 2010). The delimitations of the study include the following:

1. The study was delimited to Southern Baptist churches.

2. The study was delimited to coastal North Carolina.

3. The study was delimited to full-time pastors and ministry leaders within churches in coastal North Carolina.

Definition of Terms

1. *Church decline*: The phenomenon of church decline refers to the situation where once thriving churches, which were once instrumental in fostering positive change within their communities and out in the world, are now facing the possibility of fading away into obscurity (Mohler, 2015). The Book of Revelation offers valuable insight and direction to the church. In Revelation 2:1-7, Jesus Christ warns the Ephesian church about the potential loss of their spiritual fervor and subsequent ineffectiveness. He encourages them to repent and return to their initial zeal in order to reignite their ministry and spiritual impact.

2. *Church revitalization*: Revitalizing a church is an approach that encourages growth and maturity within the congregation (Henard, 2015). It encompasses both numerical expansion and the development of spiritual maturity among its members. However, it is imperative that the church is in good health for this revitalization process to succeed.

3. *Digital Technologies*: Electronic tools, devices, and resources such as computers, audiovisual equipment, church management software, the Internet, and mobile phone apps

4. *Ministry Leader*: A church member responsible for leading in a ministry setting

5. *Pastor*: A paid church staff member responsible for shepherding duties, which include sermons, worship, and music

Significance of the Study

The conclusions of the study have practical and theoretical implications. This research is critical because it focuses on the growth and revitalization of Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. When conducting a qualitative study, the goal is not to apply the findings to people, locations, or situations beyond those being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Instead, the strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to reveal specific details rather than broad generalizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Authors and researchers have explored the idea of church growth and revitalization. A healthy church is ideal and pursued by many church leaders (Chand, 2010; Dever, 2013; Eckhardt & Wagner, 2017; Goodhew, 2016; Henard, 2015; Mohler, 2015; Paas, 2016; Rainer, 2014; Rainer, 2020; Trimble, 2019). Recent studies concerning Baptist churches in North

Carolina have been performed. Castillo (2021) examined leadership practices among Hispanic Southern Baptist churches in North Carolina. Harris (2020) determined the impact of Sunday School participation on spiritual formation in African-American Baptist churches in North Carolina. Santos (2015) studied the disciple-making practices of Hispanic Southern Baptist pastors in North Carolina. Examining the literature demonstrates a significant lack of information on the lived experience of pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina. This qualitative study comprises an account of activities, qualities, and perspectives from Southern Baptist pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina. The interviews collected specific data on church growth and revitalization, further supporting empirical theories on church growth and revitalization.

Summary of the Design

This study used qualitative research methods to explore and understand how individuals or groups interpret and give significance to events that have occurred or are currently occurring. Specifically, the study used a phenomenological research design to investigate participants' lived experiences and their perceptions of the phenomena of church growth and revitalization. This approach focuses on understanding people's experiences from their point of view (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Lester, 1999; Roberts, 2010). To gather data, this researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with pastors and ministry leaders from the sample group in their natural settings. The data collected was analyzed for emergent themes, and conclusions were drawn based on the findings.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two explores the theological and theoretical framework of the ecclesiological purpose, pastoral leadership, numerical growth, spiritual formation, and the role of the Holy Spirit. An in-depth examination of current and past literature on broad theological concepts and social science models was conducted to understand the complexities of growing and declining churches. The chapter concludes with a review of related literature, the rationale for the study, and the gap in the literature.

Theological Framework for the Study

The only specific references to the church in the Gospels are Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17 (Easley & Morgan, 2013; Grenz, 2000). Jesus said to Peter, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Matthew 16:18). Matthew 18:17 addresses conflict resolution, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." The church first appears as a Christian entity in the Book of Acts (Easley & Morgan, 2013). Grenz (2000) contends that the church is the community of salvation. According to the New Testament, the church is a body of people saved by God's grace, for His glory, through faith in Christ (Dever, 2013).

Church leaders are interested in understanding the characteristics of a growing church (Dever, 2002). Fundamentally, a growing church comprises growing Christians (Dever, 2002). Other perspectives include evangelism, discipleship, church membership, church ratios, lay ministry, current trends among growing churches, church planting, technology, and the Holy

Spirit (Wagner et al., 1986). There are barriers to growth that need to be identified and studied to understand a growing church (Wagner et al., 1998). Leadership, relationship, and management skills are essential to overcoming the barriers preventing the church from growing (Wagner et al., 1998). Godly leadership is required to build a church of God (Wagner et al., 1998).

Biblical Mandate for Growth

God saw the living creatures in the waters and the birds flying above the earth, and "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth'" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Genesis 1:22). God created man in His own image and said, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:27-28). After the flood subsided, God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1). God promised Abraham that he will be exceedingly fruitful and be the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:3-6). Israel multiplied and increased in number during their captivity in Egypt and upon entering the Promised Land (Dever, 2013). During their exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, God instructed them through Jeremiah: "Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease" (Jeremiah 29:6).

The Bible describes flourishing in Psalm 92:12-13, "The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree, he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). According to Proverbs 24:5, "A wise man is strong, and a man of knowledge increases power." God gave instructions to increase wisdom by walking with the wise (Dever, 2013; Proverbs 13:20). Isaiah

9:7 describes the reign of the Prince of Peace: "There will be no end to the increase

of *His* government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom."

The New Testament describes the kingdom of heaven as a mustard seed that a man

sowed in his field, "and this is smaller than all *other* seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger

than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its

branches" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Matthew 13:32). Goodhew (2016)

highlights the numerical growth of the church: 3,000 converted on Pentecost; the number of men

converted reached 5,000; many priests in Jerusalem became obedient; a great crowd was

converted in Antioch; Paul and Barnabas made many disciples in Derbe; many Greeks converted

in Thessalonica; and many who heard Paul in Corinth believed and were baptized (Acts 2:41,

4:4, 6:7, 11:24, 14:21, 17:4, 18:8). Dever (2013) points out that the number of disciples was

increasing as the Word of God spread (Acts 6:1, 6:7, 12:24, 13:49, 19:20). Paul reminded the

believers that he "planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the

one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth" (1

Corinthians 3:6-7). Jesus told the parable of the seed to describe the kingdom of God: "The

kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets

up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows--how, he himself does not know" (Mark 4:26-27).

Jesus' point is that God is committed to ensuring the growth of His church (Dever, 2013).

Ecclesiological Purpose and Mission

The New Testament refers to the church as "the church", "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9,

19:23, 22:4, 24:14, 24:22), "the whole church" (Acts 5:11, 15:22), "every church" (Acts 14:23),

and "the church of God" (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 10:32, 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1;

Galatians 1:13) (Easley & Morgan, 2013; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). The

church is also called God's people and kingdom (Easley & Morgan, 2013). Grenz (2000) contends that the focal point of God's people in the New Testament is the church of Jesus Christ: "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14). The church is not a building or an organization (Dever, 2013; Grenz, 2000). The New Testament refers to the church as special people belonging to God, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God's* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The church is referred to as the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12:27). It is also referred to as the temple of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5). Paul presents the church as the "fellowship of the Spirit" (Philippians 2:1), the "brethren" (1 Thessalonians 4:10), the "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), the "one new man" (Ephesians 2:15), and the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16) (Easley & Morgan, 2013).

Easley and Morgan (2013) contend that the purpose of the church includes making known "the manifold wisdom of God" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Ephesians 3:10). God created the church, not human efforts (Easley & Morgan, 2013). God created the church to fellowship with Him and others (Easley & Morgan, 2013). The church demonstrates and proclaims the Gospel to a fallen world (Ephesians 2:1-10; Galatians 1:4; Easley & Morgan, 2013). The church has also been called to build up its members (Ephesians 4:11-16).

According to Rainer (1993), the first purpose of the church is evangelism: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Matthew 28:19); "but you will

receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Matthew 28:19 indicates a second purpose of discipleship following baptism (Rainer, 1993). A third purpose is worship through prayer, Scripture reading, singing, and observing the Lord's Supper (Acts 12:5; Acts 4:24-26; Ephesians 5:19; 1 Corinthians 11 23-26; Rainer, 1993). The fourth purpose is social ministry, with Jesus as the example of how to care for the physical and emotional needs of others (Rainer, 1993).

Pastoral Leadership

Shepherd and pastoral imagery are metaphors consistently used for leadership in the Bible and the Christian tradition (Jung et al., 2019). According to Laniak (2006), "responsible shepherds know every member of their flocks in terms of their birth circumstances, history of health, eating habits and other idiosyncrasies" (p. 56). Attentive and careful shepherds ensure the right balance of eating, drinking, and resting for the flock, and consequently become endeared to their animals (Laniak, 2006). As the seasons change, the flock's needs determine the wide range of activities involved in shepherding (Laniak, 2006). Leading the flock requires a shepherd with God's heart and a sharp, godly mind (Laniak, 2006).

Jeremiah 3:15 states, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). The promised shepherds will lead with knowledge and understanding (Laniak, 2006). Biblical passages continuously demonstrate the metaphor of God or king as a shepherd, developing the narrative of the "divine Shepherd who, with his undershepherds, looks after the needs of his vulnerable flock as they wander along the margins of settled society" (Laniak, 2006, p. 40). Psalm 23 conveys that even the king depended on God for protection and continued well-being (Laniak, 2006). It

was critical for the kings to understand that being a part of the flock of God was more fundamental than being the shepherd over that flock (Laniak, 2006). To be a shepherd means to lay down one's life for the flock: "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11; Laniak, 2006).

Henry (1706) wrote that God is a shepherd to us, and "we must be as sheep, inoffensive, meek, and quiet, silent before the shearers, nay, and before the butcher too, useful and sociable; we must know the shepherd's voice, and follow him" (para.4). God provides food, shelter, and refuge for His people. Psalm 107:9 states, "For He has satisfied the thirsty soul, And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). Hosea 13:6 illustrates disobedience using a pastoral motif: "As they had their pasture, they became satisfied, and being satisfied, their heart became proud; Therefore they forgot Me." Obedience is critical as illustrated by Samuel and Saul. Initially, the people requested a monarchy and said to Samuel, "Give us a king to judge us" (1 Samuel 8:6). The request was displeasing to Samuel, so he prayed to the Lord (1 Samuel 8:6). Ellison (2014) notes that, "When the correct choice seems clear to us, and especially when we are engaged in the issue emotionally, we must seek God's will for his people above our own beliefs, reputation, or even our perceived effectiveness" (pp. 9-10). Even though Samuel believed that the request was evil, he still chose to first discover God's will (Ellison, 2014).

David was raised as a shepherd instead of a scholar or a soldier (Henry, 1706). Psalm 78:70-71 states, "He also chose David His servant and took him from the sheepfolds; From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him to shepherd Jacob His people, and Israel His inheritance" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). According to Gunter (2018), the repeated use of the shepherd metaphor in the Bible is a crucial theme for developing a biblical

theology of pastoral leadership that is relevant to the task of pastoring God's people. The

shepherd leader motif is an essential metaphor for communicating the biblical standards of

pastoral ministry (Gunter, 2018). Gunter (2018) notes that the prominence of the shepherd motif

in both the Old and New Testaments indicates a continuity in the expectations and roles of godly

leaders throughout history.

Leadership Roles in Church Settings

Leadership is needed for the church to function in a faithful and orderly way (Easley &

Morgan, 2013; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 3:1;

Titus 1:5). The church is instructed to have all things be "done properly and in an orderly

manner" (1 Corinthians 14:40). The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 states, "Go therefore

and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and

the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." Leadership that is focused

on obedience to the Great Commission will implement biblical growth principles (Rainer, 1993).

Leaders and followers must be of a single mind and devoted to reaching other people (Rainer,

1993).

Apostles and prophets were foundational for the church (Easley & Morgan, 2013; *New

American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Ephesians 2:20; 3:5). Evangelists spread the gospel and

plant churches (Easley & Morgan, 2013). Pastors shepherd the flock, exercise oversight, and

prove to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3). The Holy Spirit has made elders and overseers

who help shepherd the church (Acts 20:28). Teachers help apply God's Word and pass on the

church's revealed teachings, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that

He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (Easley &

Morgan, 2013; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Prophets are more concerned with bringing new

inspirational insights (Easley & Morgan, 2013). Elders and overseers exhibit care through

teaching and shepherding (Easley & Morgan, 2013; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 15-9). Deacons are

required to have similar characteristics except they are not required to teach, and they should not

be double-tongued (Easley & Morgan, 2013; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). That God obtained the flock

with the blood of His own son indicates the flock's great dignity and emphasizes the leaders'

great responsibility (Jung et al., 2019).

Biblical servant leadership is an unconventional concept, as it goes against society's

typical understanding of leadership (Northouse, 2019). Instead of seeking position, power, and

status, the leader adopts a servant-like posture (Northouse, 2019). Solomon regarded himself as a

servant when he prayed for his ability to judge God's great people (*New American Standard

Bible*, 1971/1995, 1 Kings 3:9). Rehoboam consulted the elders who served his father Solomon

and, "Then they spoke to him, saying, 'If you will be a servant to this people today, and will

serve them and grant them their petition, and speak good words to them, then they will be your

servants forever'" (1 Kings 12:7). Jesus' instructions are, "whoever wishes to become great

among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave"

(Matthew 20:26-27).

According to Bredfeldt (2006), having competence alone can result in poor leadership if

there is no character. As Christian leaders, it is essential to follow Paul's guidance in Philippians

2:3-8, which emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of others, not just their own

(*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). The goal should be to emulate Christ's character.

That involves emptying oneself and taking the posture of a servant. However, a leader-centric

focus is limited in fully understanding leadership dynamics (Ledbetter et al., 2016). Opening the

dimension of followership moves the focus away from the leader and more toward what it means

to be a follower and the impact followers have on leadership (Ledbetter et al., 2016). In Matthew

27:11-26, Pilate was sitting in the judgment seat, and he was under the influence of Jesus, his

wife, the chief priests, the elders, and the vast crowd. The multitude of people ultimately

influenced Pilate's judgment: "Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called

Christ?" They all said, "Crucify Him!" (Matthew 27:22). In Luke 23:4, Pilate told the chief

priests and the crowd, "I find no guilt in this man." Pilate knew the right thing to do. Still, the

pressure from the crowd pushed him in the direction that the chief priests and elders wanted.

Leaders who are corrupt have the ability to influence their followers to choose worldly desires

over spiritual salvation, similar to how Barabbas was chosen over Jesus (Clarke, 1832).

Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation involves members of the body maturing together to be more like

Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and according to biblical standards (Pettit, 2008). Growth

in Christian maturity is a lifelong process and goal for all Christians (Pettit, 2008). There are four

foundational concepts of Christian growth: knowing one's identity in Christ, knowing one's

relation with the Christian community, pursuing integrity in an authentic biblical community

group, and practicing service toward God and others (Pettit, 2008). Each principle builds upon

the previous one (Pettit, 2008). Christian spiritual maturity consists of knowing one's identity in

Christ and making oneself known to others in a Christian community (Pettit, 2008). Christians

seek to be fully equipped to glorify Christ by serving others in ministry (Pettit, 2008).

Spiritual maturity is central to Paul's life, work, and thought (Samra, 2008). The

undisputed Pauline epistles address how Paul thinks a Christian becomes mature and what Paul

thinks it means to be mature (Samra, 2008). Philippians 3:12-15 reveals how Paul regards

maturation as a process, "Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but

I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995). Paul explicitly states that he is undergoing a maturation process and encourages his converts to share his attitude of pressing on "toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14; Samra, 2008).

In Paul's mind, the characteristics of a mature believer include seven distinct marks of maturity: mature, spiritual, holy, free, wise, strong, and Christlike (Samra, 2008). Paul's concept of maturity is one in which Christians progressively mature toward Christlikeness (Samra, 2008). Christ is the ultimate standard of maturity to which all Christians aspire (Samra, 2008). In Paul's mind, to be mature is to be a person who is like Christ, conforming to his character and image (Samra, 2008). Christ is the paradigm for believers and the only standard by which maturity is defined (Samra, 2008).

Paul has instructed believers, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Romans 12:2). Samra (2008) calls this component of the maturation process "identifying with Christ" (p. 113). Samra (2008) does not indicate that Paul wanted believers to equate themselves or consider themselves identical to Christ. Instead, the intention is to associate oneself very closely or inseparably with Christ so that "identifying with Christ" indicates a process of strengthening one's self-categorization as a believer in Christ and as a member of the faith community (p. 113).

"Enduring suffering" is another component of the maturation process (Samra, 2008, p. 116). Suffering produces Christlike character: "For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, 2 Corinthians 4:17; Samra, 2008). Suffering is the means to glory because it

produces patience and tested character (Samra, 2008). The ongoing production of patience and character is part of the maturation process and conformation to the image of Christ (Samra, 2008).

Emotional intelligence reflects one's spiritual maturity (Malphurs, 2018). Malphurs (2018) has six foundational assumptions in the study of emotional intelligence. First, emotionally mature Christians are spiritually mature believers who exhibit high levels of emotional intelligence (Malphurs, 2018). Emotional maturity is equivalent to emotional intelligence, also called emotional quotient (EQ) (Malphurs, 2018). Second, the Godhead is characterized by emotions, and He experiences emotions such as love, anger, joy, and hope (Malphurs, 2018). People are emotional beings because they were created in the image of God, and emotions are a part of human identity. (Malphurs, 2018). Third, an emotionally mature church is the hope of the world (Malphurs, 2018). It is Christ's desire to build an emotionally mature church that reaches the lost and edifies those who have been saved (Malphurs, 2018; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Matthew 16:18). Fourth, emotional intelligence is critical to God-honoring leadership (Malphurs, 2018). A church cannot function well and accomplish its mission without servant leadership and high emotional intelligence levels (Malphurs, 2018). Fifth, Scripture stresses the importance of emotional maturity (Malphurs, 2018). While the world proclaims truth is relative, the Bible provides absolute truth (Malphurs, 2018). Scripture provides the truths that reveal the importance of emotional maturity (Malphurs, 2018). Lastly, emotions are central to humanity (Malphurs, 2018). What it means to be human involves emotions to some degree (Malphurs, 2018).

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Old Testament introduces the Holy Spirit through plural pronouns (Estep et al., 2008). "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" indicates that God is not solitary (Estep et al., 2008; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Genesis 1:26). Genesis 1:2 talks about the Holy Spirit's presence during the creation of the world, "The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters." The Holy Spirit's power supersedes temporal dynamics (Cameron, 2012; Zechariah 4:6). The Holy Spirit has the divine attribute of omniscience:

> For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, 1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

The Holy Spirit is omnipresent, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). The Holy Spirit also has the divine attribute of omnipotence, "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

The New Testament states that the Holy Spirit dwells in believers, "*that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, John 14:17). The Holy Spirit is involved in conversion and sanctification. Jesus says,

> Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (John 3:5-6).

Paul describes the process of sanctification and tells us, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from

glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit renews and regenerates: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is active in developing Christian attributes of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). Qualities of godliness result from the Holy Spirit's supernatural work in the believer (Bredfeldt, 2006).

Grenz (2000) contends that the Holy Spirit brings believers to confess Jesus' lordship. Paul said, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, 1 Corinthians 12:3). Paul indicated that unity is produced by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:3). The Holy Spirit is the bond that links believers as one unified people (Grenz, 2000). Furthermore, Paul appealed to unity and said, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). The Holy Spirit makes the many into one because Jesus created a new and redeemed community (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). In doing so, the church's unity as a faith community is maintained (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Establishing new Christian communities in a society that is increasingly secular and post-Christian poses challenges, according to Paas (2016). Illeris (2008) suggests that theories and perspectives guide what to expect and how to approach problems rather than explicitly stating what needs to be done. Marmon (2013) notes that no single theory can explain every aspect of the meaning-making process. Fitzmaurice and Percy (2017) suggest evaluating and critiquing the

principles of the growth paradigm within a church. To ensure long-term sustainability and realistic expectations, church leadership must draw on valuable insights from previous strategies and approaches that have shaped church growth activity (Paas, 2016).

Historical Roots of Church Decline

Dreher (2017) posits that society's fragmentation can be traced back to the decline of the Christian religion. This decline began seven centuries ago and can be linked to events such as the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the Sexual Revolution (Dreher, 2017). These movements challenged the church's authority and contributed to the fragmentation of society (Dreher, 2017). Anthony and Benson (2011) agree that the church has significantly impacted society throughout history. However, this influence weakened over time due to several movements, including the Industrial Revolution, the Renaissance, the Romantic movement, German idealistic philosophy, and the scientific method (Anthony & Benson, 2011).

The scientific method, introduced during the Renaissance era by Roger Bacon, revolutionized how individuals approached scientific inquiry (Anthony & Benson, 2011). This method allows individuals to formulate a hypothesis about the natural world and conduct experiments to confirm it, leading to a more empirical and evidence-based approach to understanding the world (Anthony & Benson, 2011). Inventions such as the printing press, birth control pill, and the Internet have also challenged traditional notions of authority and led to a shift away from biblical principles (Dreher, 2017). These innovations have paved the way for new modes of thinking, which have challenged traditional notions of authority and human nature (Dreher, 2017). As a result, some individuals have come to believe that the Bible is no longer

relevant in today's world (Anthony & Benson, 2011). This has led to a shift from the strict application of biblical principles (Anthony & Benson, 2011).

In recent years, a growing number of individuals in the United States do not associate themselves with any specific religion, according to a report by Barna (2017). Additionally, Pew Research Center (2019) reported that the decline of Christianity in the country is continuing rapidly. Mohler (2015) contends that the secularization in Europe and Canada will soon happen in America. According to Ezell (2015), the Christian community in North America faces three major challenges: a shortage of new churches, an unexpected number of church closures, and established churches losing their focus on outreach. These issues hinder the church's expansion and positive impact on local communities (Ezell, 2015).

Mathematical Models of Church Growth

Mathematical models can be utilized to describe the dynamic processes of church growth (Hayward, 1999; Hayward, 2005; Nyabadza, 2008; Rogers, 2003). Hayward (1999) applied mathematical models from population modeling to model church growth. A model was developed based on the interactions between religious enthusiasts and unbelievers in which the enthusiasts recruit for a limited period (Hayward, 1999). Mathematical equations were utilized to describe an epidemic model with its spread by contact and limited infectious period (Hayward, 1999). The epidemic model was applied to church growth behaviors and the dynamic processes between church enthusiasts and non-believers (Hayward, 1999). The S-shaped behavior found in the growth of churches describes the dynamics of conversion (Hayward, 1999). When observing an S-shaped curve of a time series plot, it becomes clear that the rate of change gradually rises and then falls over a period of time. Rogers (2003) observed a similar relationship in his analysis of the diffusion of agricultural innovations, the diffusion of kindergartens and of driver training

among schools, and the spread of an antibiotic drug among doctors. Rogers (2003) observed an S-shaped adoption rate over time, indicating that diffusion is a general process independent of place, culture, the type of innovation, and the adopters.

Hayward (2005) and Nyabadza (2008) presented mathematical models using the church reproduction potential. Hayward (2005) examined the long-term effect of births, deaths, and reversion from the church. Not everyone in the church community is involved in activities that promote new member recruitment (Hayward, 2005). The church enthusiasts involved in the recruitment process only do so for a limited time after their conversion (Hayward, 2005). There is an equilibrium between their efforts to reproduce themselves and the church's losses (Hayward, 2005). A reproduction potential determines whether church growth and decline is above or below an extinction threshold (Hayward, 2005). According to Hayward (2005), church decline and extinction are due to an inadequate reproduction potential, instead of excessive losses from the church. The model by Nyabadza (2008) incorporates exposure before conversion, internal revival, and restoration of enthusiasm. Internal revival is an important mechanism that accelerates church growth, in addition to the recruitment of new members (Nyabadza, 2008). For a declining church, growth can only be achieved through internal revival so that the number of active believers outweighs the number of inactive believers (Nyabadza, 2008).

Bretherton and Dunbar (2020) found that large congregations tend to have lower active member engagement. Single-leader congregations are limited to around 150 members, and once a congregation exceeds this number, it becomes stratified into smaller groups (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020). Furthermore, tensions arise in congregations with more than 150 members, which often leads to reorganization (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020). To retain active member

engagement, congregations that exceed 150 members must implement structural subdivisions (Bretherton & Dunbar, 2020).

Religious Market Theory

According to Gooren (2006), religious organizations compete for followers who make rational choices from available options, as outlined in the Religious Market theory. In this model, pluralism and religious freedom are crucial for enabling competition between such organizations (Gooren, 2006). Gooren's concept of the "conversion career" refers to a member's progression through different levels of religious activity in their social and cultural context. Using a life-cycle approach, Gooren (2006) identified five levels of increasing religious participation: disaffiliation, pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, and confession. These levels are influenced by various factors, such as personality, social, institutional, cultural, and contingency (Gooren, 2006). Additionally, the conversion career approach distinguishes between four stages in a person's life: childhood, adolescence, marriage, and old age (Gooren, 2006). By connecting the religious demand of individuals with the religious supply of competing churches on the religious market, the conversion career approach sheds light on the dynamics of religious competition (Gooren, 2006).

Rational Choice Theory

According to Stoll and Petersen (2008), churches experience growth or decline based on their resources, the scope of their programs, and their recruitment strategies. Stoll and Petersen (2008) propose that the Rational Choice theory can be applied to view churches as religious firms and individuals as religious consumers. In this framework, churches compete by offering products and services catering to religious consumers' needs (Stoll & Petersen, 2008).

Systems Theory

Banks (2013) applied Systems theory to explain church growth. Banks (2013) viewed each church member as part of a collective body, while also considering denominations, religious groups, communities, and nations as larger systems. Within individual churches, there are various subsystems such as administrative structures, committees, deacons, church programs, and other subgroups (Banks, 2013).

Secularization Theories

There is a noticeable trend toward secularism in the United States during the 21st century, as observed by Smith (2021). According to Smith (2021), approximately 30% of American adults identify as "nones" (para. 3). They are individuals who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or having no particular religious affiliation (Smith, 2021). There are different theories about why religious participation is declining. Traditional theories of secularization suggest that changes in income, education, industrialization, urbanization, and family life are responsible (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). Some experts also believe that the growth of the welfare state is a factor (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). Additionally, government spending on education has been associated with lower church attendance (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). Governments have the power to shape long-term religious trends by influencing the content of school curricula (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014).

According to secularization theory, religion declines as people move away from traditional communities due to urbanization (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). This theory also suggests that industrialization and changes in family dynamics have rationalized work and separated production from consumption (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). Pluralism, or exposure to competing views and lifestyles, is another factor that contributes to religious decline (Franck &

Iannaccone, 2014). Additionally, advancements in prosperity, health, and technology have reduced the number of needs that religious institutions used to fulfill (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014). Furthermore, government funding of schools has increased government control over school content, which can shape religious beliefs and commitments (Franck & Iannaccone, 2014).

According to Maitanmi (2009), the challenges of Christian education are summarized in three words: secularism, consumerism, and relativism. Secularism deals with mass media such as television, movies, music, and the Internet which aim to remove religion from the public square (Maitanmi, 2019). These forces represent faith as being for fools while promoting individualism, consumerism, hedonism, and relativism as idols (Maitanmi, 2019). Clutter, sexualizing, and consumerism need to be addressed (Trozzo, 2021). Mass media has also attempted to relegate schools to the private sector (Maitanmi, 2019). Consumerism promotes the idea that parents need to discern between Christian schools, charter schools, home schools, virtual schools, and mix-and-match schools to maximize the return on their financial investment in Christian education (Maitanmi, 2019). Consumerism also promotes the idea that school and church have become one, and parents must make a choice related to school admission for their children (Maitanmi, 2019). There are parents seeking better-paying jobs for their children by enrolling them in Christian schools as an investment (Maitanmi, 2019). Relativism deals with the assumption that there is no absolute truth because of the assumption that truth is relative (Maitanmi, 2019). What is true for an individual may become false or not entirely true because of the idea that nobody can claim to have objective truth (Maitanmi, 2019).

Postmodernism, government, finance, and social policies have influenced the decline in Christian educational institutions (Maitanmi, 2019). The three-legged stool concept can be

applied to Christian education (Maitanmi, 2019). The three legs represent the church congregation, the home, and the school (Maitanmi, 2019). If one leg is longer than another or if one leg was accidentally broken, the seat becomes unstable, or even unusable (Maitanmi, 2019). If the church, home, and school are well-balanced, the student will have the necessary worldview to survive well as a citizen of God's kingdom (Maitanmi, 2019).

Relevant Leadership Theories

A healthy church needs Christian leaders who understand significant leadership and management approaches. Leadership is a highly valued idea that individuals seek more information on to improve their personal, social, and professional lives (Malphurs, 2018; Northouse, 2019; Ward, 2007). Christian leaders must identify the point of alignment and non-alignment between a Christian worldview and classical, contextual, conditioning, and transformational leadership and management theories. Those who teach and guide others play a crucial role, as emphasized by Wilhoit (1991). It is the responsibility of Christian leaders to study the Scripture and share its teachings (Howie, 1962). However, it is imperative that they also prioritize the development of their values to be effective in their ministry (Wilhoit, 1991). There is a significant impact on follower attitudes and behaviors when leaders put their principles into practice (Kouzes and Posner, 2017). The common phrases to describe credibility include: "They practice what they preach," "They walk the talk," "Their actions are consistent with their words," "They put their money where their mouth is," "They follow through in their promises," and "They do what they say they will do" (Kouzes and Posner, 2017, p. 43). Someone who aims to influence others but does not lead by example does not have credibility as this would cause their words to lack authority and meaning (Bredfeldt, 2006).

Classical Theories

Classical leadership and management theories rely on leaders, policies, and procedures to guide followers' actions (Northouse, 2019). According to the trait approach, major leadership traits include intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Northouse, 2019). The Five-Factor Personality Model identifies neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness as key components of personality (Goldberg, 1990). Emotional intelligence can be used to evaluate how these traits impact leadership (Northouse, 2019). However, church leaders who struggle often lack emotional intelligence, according to Malphurs (2018).

According to the skills approach, leadership skills are the essential abilities that enable effective leadership (Mumford et al., 2000). Mumford et al. (2000) developed a skill-based model with five key components: competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experiences, and environmental influences. Katz (2009) identified three crucial abilities that managers should cultivate: technical, human, and conceptual skills.

In 1911, Frederick Taylor introduced Scientific Management because he believed that cooperation between management and workers was necessary to work according to scientific laws (Taylor, 1911). Meanwhile, Max Weber developed Bureaucratic Management Theory (Weber, 2013).

Contextual Theories

Contextual theories of leadership entail adapting leadership behaviors to suit the prevailing situation and culture. The behavioral approach focuses on what leaders do instead of their traits or skills (Northouse, 2019). Hemphill and Coons (1957) developed the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) at Ohio State, which identified initiation of structure and consideration as core leadership behaviors (as cited in Northouse, 2019). The

Michigan studies by Bowers and Seashore (1966) identified the core leader behaviors of production and employee orientation. Blake and Mouton's Leadership Grid portrays five major leadership styles: authority-compliance, country-club management, impoverished management, middle-of-the-road management, and team management (Blake & McCanse, 1991).

The situational approach focuses on leadership behaviors based on the demands of a particular situation (Northouse, 2019). Hersey and Blanchard (1969) introduced Situational Leadership, which requires a leader to diagnose their behavior in light of their environment. Situational Leadership II (SLII) classified leadership into directing, coaching, supporting, and delegating based on the employee's level of development (Blanchard, 1985). SLII diagnosed employees as enthusiastic beginners, disillusioned learners, capable but cautious contributors, or self-reliant achievers (Blanchard, 1985).

Conditioning Theories

Conditioning theories involve an approach to leadership that relies on operant conditioning and rewards to achieve desired follower behaviors. Path-Goal Theory focuses on how leaders motivate followers to accomplish designated goals (Northouse, 2019). Motivation is a set of energetic forces that originates within and outside an individual (Colquitt et al., 2019). Motivation initiates work-related effort and determines its direction, intensity, and persistence (Colquitt et al., 2019). Vroom's Expectancy Theory defines motivation as Motivation = Expectancy x Instrumentality x Valance (as cited in Solomon et al., 2018).

The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory approaches leadership as an exchange relationship. It probes the exchange processes between the leader and each of their members (Dansereau et al., 1975). LMX Theory attempts to predict the future behaviors of the leader and follower based on influence with and without authority (Dansereau et al., 1975). Transactional

leaders pursue a personal agenda and satisfy only their needs (Kuhnert, 1994). Transactional leadership factors include contingent reward and management by exception (Northouse, 2019).

Transformational Theories

Transformational leadership results in followers who have the desire to follow their leader. Transformational leadership consists of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration of followers' needs (Christie et al., 2011). The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) is the most widely used measure of transformational leadership (Northouse, 2019). Authentic leadership comprises internalized regulation, balanced information processing, relational transparency, and genuine behavior (Gardner et al., 2005). Psychological capacities associated with authenticity include confidence, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Servant leadership differs from transformational and authentic leadership because its central component is altruism (Northouse, 2019).

The Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership is the most recognized and comprehensive center for training in servant leadership (Northouse, 2019). Robert Greenleaf's servant leadership comprises listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community (Northouse, 2019). These positive attributes and psychological capacities enhance a person's ability to develop the characteristics of a servant leader (Northouse, 2019).

Power Bases

French and Raven (1959) determined the leader's power bases as reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power. According to Bass and Bass (2008), power refers to the ability of one person to influence others. It plays a role in leadership and

influence but should not be confused with them (Bass & Bass, 2008). Information is also considered a source of power (Bass & Bass, 2008). Additionally, in Acts 1:8, Jesus talks about spiritual power, "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995).

Communication Style

Effective communication is vital to leadership (Grusendorf, 2016; Irving & Strauss, 2019). A leader's communication approach is closely linked to how they exercise their power (Grusendorf, 2016). According to Russo et al. (2008), there are four distinct communication styles: direct, spirited, systematic, and considerate. According to Bolman and Deal (2017), leaders should prioritize communication in order to improve their organization's effectiveness. MacMillan (2001) suggests that high-performance teams possess excellent communication skills. Momeny and Gourgues (2020) argue that leaders who communicate effectively are more likely to maintain the health of their ministry teams. Lehmann-Willenbrock et al. (2017) state that building and maintaining relationships is a key outcome of working in groups and teams. The effectiveness and competency of the leader play a crucial role in ensuring that the team stays on track (MacMillan, 2001). Leaders must create a culture that fosters collaboration and accountability in performance management (Beaumont, 2014). Cladis (1999) suggests that influential leaders prioritize collaboration over competition among team members.

Leadership Versus Management

A simple internet search yields many resources about leadership, management, and its associated subtopics. Ward (2007) contends that more research efforts have been invested in the study of leadership than any other single topic in social science. With the vast amount of

information available, one must use their biblical worldview to carefully discern which ones to accept, integrate, or reject completely. Lynch (2019) suggests managerialism has been the dominant leadership narrative in the Western church. While leadership and management are distinct, similarly, leaders and managers are not the same people (Toor & Ofori, 2008).

The leader is an individual who establishes the meaning and direction of a group (Goleman et al., 2013; Kotterman, 2006; Solomon et al., 2016; Bennis, 2009). The leader has a clear idea of the guiding vision and has the strength to overcome obstacles, setbacks, and failures (Bennis, 2009). The manager "administers," "maintains," "focuses on systems and structures," "relies on control," "has a short-range view," "asks how and when," "has his or her eye always on the bottom line," and "accepts the status quo" (Bennis, 2009, p. 42). In contrast, the leader "innovates," "develops," "focuses on people," "inspires trust," "has a long-range perspective," "asks what and why," has their "eye on the horizon," and challenges the status quo (Bennis, 2009, p. 42). Although different, people typically use the terms manager and leader interchangeably (Toor & Ofori, 2008). Leaders and managers have different roles and approaches in the workplace. They set direction, allocate resources, and motivate people (Kotterman, 2006). Managers focus on planning, budgeting, maintaining order, stabilizing work, and organizing resources (Kotterman, 2006). Both managers and leaders have varying ways of thinking, values, contributions, and risk aversion. Their work, problem-solving methods, behaviors, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations also differ (Toor & Ofori, 2008).

Collins (2001) has an approach that differs from the assumption that a leader's primary responsibility is establishing a new vision and strategy. According to Collins (2001), influential leaders prioritize getting the right people on the bus, removing the wrong people, and placing the right people in the correct positions. By having the right people on the bus, leaders can save time

and energy that would have been spent on motivating people, as these individuals will already be self-motivated (Collins, 2001). Rather than determining the bus's destination and convincing people to join, successful executives in good to great transformations focus on acquiring the right team, eliminating unsuitable members, and then determining the direction (Collins, 2001).

Kotter (2013) agrees that leadership and management are not synonymous. People make three mistakes on the issue, creating confusion and misunderstandings (Kotter, 2013). The first mistake is using the terms "management" and "leadership" interchangeably (Kotter, 2013). The second mistake is to use the term "leadership" to refer to individuals at the top of organizational hierarchies, and then use the term "management" for individuals below (Kotter, 2013). The third mistake is to think of leadership in terms of personality characteristics such as charisma (Kotter, 2013). There is a critical difference between the vital functions and roles of individuals involved in leadership and individuals involved in management (Kotter, 2013). Management is a known set of processes, such as planning, budgeting, structuring jobs, staffing, measuring performance, and problem-solving (Kotter, 2013). Leadership is radically different as it is about the organization's future, finding opportunities, and successfully exploiting them (Kotter, 2013). Leadership involves vision, buy-in, empowerment, and producing useful change (Kotter, 2013).

Managers' attitudes toward human relations differ from leaders (Zaleznik, 2004). Although managers tend to seek out activity with other people, the emotional involvement in those relationships maintains a low level (Zaleznik, 2004). Leaders consider the importance of events and decisions as well as what they mean to the participants (Zaleznik, 2004). Frederick Taylor's Scientific Management is criticized for its negative view of workers. These criticisms have been discussed in studies by Ndaguba et al. (2018) and Haakestad & Friberg (2020). It prioritizes making systems more efficient over improving individual workers (Ndaguba et al.,

2018). As a result, it can lead to lower wages, poor working conditions, limited career prospects, and strained relationships between workers and management (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020).

Leadership in Church Settings

Strong leadership competencies are essential for the overall health and success of a local church within its community (Addai-Duah et al., 2019; Mills, 2016; Miner & Bickerton, 2020; Momeny & Gourgues, 2020). According to the Bible, good leadership can result in a healthy and thriving community (Laniak, 2006; *New American Standard Bible*, 1971/1995, Jeremiah 23:3). Understanding the challenges of the 21st century is vital for leaders to succeed in a competitive environment (Bennis, 2009). Christian leaders should be able to identify the strengths and needs of their church and implement strategies to create a positive church culture (Chand, 2010). Leadership awareness is crucial in today's complex and ever-changing world (Goleman et al., 2013). It is wise for leaders to study leadership research throughout history and filter information through a biblical-theological grid to discern God's truth (Malphurs, 2018). Acquiring leadership competencies is essential, but it is not enough to become a leader. The "beliefs, values, and life-commitments" that sustain a leader's life are far more critical (Ward, 2007, para. 9).

Keita and Lao (2020) explored the Full Range Leadership theory by Bernard Bass and servant leadership by Robert Greenleaf in church settings. The Full Range Leadership theory relates to transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership (Bass & Bass, 2008). Pastors, deacons, ministers, and congregation members were interviewed to determine their understanding of transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, and servant leadership styles (Keita & Lao, 2020). The qualitative exploratory case study comprises accounts of activities, qualities, and policies from Pentecostal church leaders and members in Alexandria and Springfield, VA (Keita & Lao, 2020). The analysis yielded twelve themes: ideal church

leadership styles, church leadership management, church leadership motivation, leadership styles that ensure church growth, effective leadership communication, leadership practices, developing leadership, perception of leadership, church attendance growth and decline rate, leadership roles, church administrator's handbook, and vision and mission statements (Keita & Lao, 2020). Transformational and servant leadership styles are perceived to solve leadership problems within the Pentecostal church (Keita & Lao, 2020). Church leaders must be competent in both spiritual and secular aspects to generate prosperity and keep up with the needs of members, disciples, community sponsors, and the church (Keita & Lao, 2020).

The study conducted by Francis et al. (2015) suggested that psychological type theory could help predict the patterns of church growth and decline in different regions and contexts. Specifically, the research looked at the relationship between the psychological type profile of church leaders and the growth or decline of churches in the Diocese of Chester (Francis et al., 2015). The theory classified the perceiving process into two functions: sensing and intuition, and the judging process into two functions: thinking and feeling (Jung, 1971). The terms introversion and extraversion refer to a fundamental preference that affects one's entire thought process (Jung, 1971). It dictates how a person typically reacts to situations, influences their behavior style, and shapes their subjective experiences (Jung, 1971). Psychological type theory distinguished between introversion and extraversion as sources of psychological energy and the two attitudes of judging or perceiving the external world (Francis et al., 2015). The study found that clergy who use their preferred perceiving function tend to lead growing churches (Francis et al., 2015). They are more adaptable and open-minded, which helps them understand and respond to changes in their environment (Francis et al., 2015).

Emotional Intelligence and Church Leadership

Emotions, as a formal scientific field of study, is a relatively new science that came about approximately 30 years ago (Malphurs, 2018). The concept of emotional intelligence has expanded beyond the business realm and is now being taught in universities, medical schools, and other professional training programs (Goleman et al., 2013). It has also gained popularity among professional coaches (Goleman et al., 2013). However, struggling church leaders often exhibit emotional intelligence deficiencies (Malphurs, 2018). In order to be effective in ministry, it is crucial for Christian leaders to exhibit emotionally intelligent leadership. According to Malphurs (2018), leaders should work on becoming more aware of their emotions. Malphurs (2018) also suggests studying leadership research from history and filtering it through a biblical-theological lens to discern God's truth.

According to the Bible, there are seven primary emotions: love, joy, hope, jealousy, fear, sorrow, and anger (Malphurs, 2018). Four models that can help leaders become emotionally mature leaders include the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Model, the Bar-On Model, the Boyatzis-Goleman Model, and a Scripture-based model (Malphurs, 2018). The model based on Scripture includes personal competence, social competence, emotional self-awareness, emotional self-management, understanding the emotions of others, and managing the emotions of others (Malphurs, 2018). Scripture is full of situations demonstrating the need for good relational skills because Christianity is lived out through relationships (Malphurs, 2018).

According to Momeny and Gourgues (2020), leaders who possess emotional intelligence are more likely to effectively maintain the health of their ministry teams. Effective leaders possess emotional maturity, inspiring their followers by managing their own emotions and those of others. (Malphurs, 2018). According to Ciarrochi & Mayer (2007), a leader's emotions can

greatly impact their thinking, actions, and overall results. Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in positively influencing others by creating a desired mood (Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2007). Being able to effectively use emotional information can also allow for the modification of others' feelings (Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2007). In contrast, a lack of emotional insight may indicate uncertainty in understanding how people feel and what drives them (Ciarrochi & Mayer, 2007). Leaders have a significant impact on the self-esteem of their followers, which is crucial for their effectiveness and influence in spreading the message of Christ (Malphurs, 2018). Therefore, it is important for Christian leaders to give careful consideration to this aspect of leadership.

Goleman et al. (2013) discuss how organizations that are experiencing flat growth can improve by focusing on the emotional well-being of their teams and fostering self-awareness. The authors introduce a new set of leadership styles that are based on emotional intelligence capabilities, including visionary, coaching, affiliative, democratic, pacesetting, and commanding. Each leadership style uniquely impacts outcomes and climate, which in turn affects performance (Goleman et al., 2013). Emotional intelligence leadership competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, are crucial for uncovering a team's emotional reality and improving performance (Goleman et al., 2013). Effective leaders must communicate reality and ideal visions, and operating with conflicting leadership styles can lead to a toxic culture (Goleman et al., 2013). Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of self-awareness in fostering a positive emotional climate within organizations.

Related Literature

This section of the literature review explores various topics associated with the growth and revitalization of churches. The topics include obstacles that can hinder the success of a

church, the significance of the Christian community, the impact of digital technology, and the concept of virtual congregations.

Hindrances to Church Growth and Revitalization

Church Decline

In the life of any organization, there are periods of growth and decline which can be indicated by specific milestones reflecting changes in its development and overall health (Trimble, 2019). Similar to how people go through birth, growth, decline, and eventually death, organizations also follow this pattern (Trimble, 2019). Over time, perceptions, goals, needs, and challenges change, and this progression can be effectively illustrated on a standard bell curve (Trimble, 2019). A church's lifecycle can be divided into four quadrants: new, growth, decline, and dying (Trimble, 2019). Each quadrant represents a distinct stage that requires different leadership skills, resources, ministries, and strategies (Trimble, 2019). In order to understand the current condition of a church, it is important to determine where it falls in its lifecycle. (Trimble, 2019).

Rainer (2014) contends that the growth of a church may come rapidly while its decline is "imperceptibly slow" (p. 12). Most churches in America do not close because of a single or few catastrophic events (Rainer, 2014). Church members do not have the sense of urgency to change because they do not perceive the slow decline that is taking place (Rainer, 2014). The slow erosion manifests in the physical facilities, vibrant ministries that once existed, the members' prayer lives, the church's outward focus, the connection with the community, and members' hopes and dreams (Rainer, 2014). The path of wrong choices involves choosing tradition, comfort, preferences, and death over change (Rainer, 2020). Churches that are alive after turning

away from a path that seemed destined for death are referred to as "breakout churches,"

"turnaround churches," "revitalized churches," and "revived churches." (Rainer, 2020, p. 26).

Church Conflict

Conflicts may arise from worship music and style, order of worship service, times of

worship services, unclear roles, ministry programs, facilities, meetings, staff positions, and

church membership (Rainer, 2020). While there is no simple answer to church revitalization,

Rainer (2020) contends that churches that refuse to change are headed toward death because

church revitalization does not occur without a willingness to change. According to Bridges

(2016), organizational changes often fail because people's needs are not considered. Sometimes,

those in charge are so focused on the future that they forget how the changes affect individuals

(Bridges, 2016). They fail to consider how to manage the transition effectively (Bridges, 2016).

Van Yperen (2002) gives an example of a leader who challenged a manipulative and defensive

pastor, only to face resistance from the church. Unfortunately, some people use defensive

behaviors and spiritual authority to protect themselves and gain power (Van Yperen, 2002).

Van Yperen (2002), Kotter (2012), and Rahim and Bonoma (1979) agree that leaders

must manage conflicts. Leaders must address current and potential future conflicts (Van Yperen,

2002). Leaders need to manage conflicts and overcome resistance along the way (Kotter, 2012).

Conflicts between individuals, groups, and organizations must be managed, not necessarily

reduced, or eliminated (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979).

According to Van Yperen (2002), there are five biblical truths about church conflict. It is

a broken relationship, a spiritual collision, inevitable, necessary, and an opportunity (Van

Yperen, 2002). Kotter (2012) describes an eight-stage process for creating major change that

involves establishing urgency, creating a coalition, developing a vision and strategy,

communicating the vision, empowering action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. Bridges (2016) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging losses and empathizing with others during transitions and changes. Empathy is the ability to pay attention to others and understand and appreciate their emotions in a relationship, as stated by Zaleznik (2004). Identifying what is ending and who is losing what is crucial during times of change, according to Bridges (2016). Change and endings are inherently linked because transitioning to something new involves letting go of old ways and identities (Bridges, 2016). To understand the losses that come with change, it is important to empathize with others and recognize their subjective experiences (Bridges, 2016). People often overreact to losses during transitions instead of focusing on the changes themselves (Bridges, 2016). Acknowledging and discussing losses can inspire a commitment to change within an organization's culture, as Bridges (2016) noted. Leaders must motivate action to anchor change, rather than relying on ultimatums, indifferent attitudes, or logical explanations, and instead use empathy as the best approach, as recommended by Bridges (2016) and Kotter (2012).

Community and Spiritual Formation

Fitzmaurice and Percy (2017) contend that the corrosion of character due to the focus on growth within secular institutions can make its way into a church that is not operating with a virtue-based growth ethic. Growth as a church's primary task is shallow and risks losing the spiritual maturity it purports to proclaim (Fitzmaurice & Percy, 2017). Spiritual maturity involves individuals growing together to become more like Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit and biblical principles (Pettit, 2008). While some view Christian spirituality solely as a personal relationship with Jesus, Howard (2018) argues that reflecting the image of God requires a communal approach and extending God's ministry to communities. Gathering as a community

acknowledges that human flourishing depends on a dynamic relationship with God (Smith, 2009).

Belonging to a community is a vital aspect of the Christian faith. It is essential to know others and be known to them as per Pettit (2008). God's plan for human flourishing cannot be achieved in isolation alone (Smith, 2009). Early Christians were seen worshipping, evangelizing, praying, singing, and living together as a community (Kauflin, 2008). The goal of spiritual formation is not individual growth outside the community but rather personal development within and for the community (Pettit, 2008). As in the Old Testament, the emphasis should be on the people of God and not just on individuals (Kauflin, 2008).

When people gather for church, they bring various gifts that aid in the community's growth (Howard, 2018). Spiritual gifts, as noted by Wagner (2012), are essential for the well-being and advancement of the church. It is important to distinguish between spiritual gifts, talents, and roles to comprehend their distinct meanings (Wagner, 2012). Acknowledging one's spiritual gifts is crucial in maintaining a healthy church (Wagner, 2012). Through sharing of themselves in love, despite their differences, Christians aid each other in spiritual formation (Howard, 2018). When Christians partake in communal practices that honor God, they live in a way that is formative and integral to Christian discipleship (Smith, 2009).

According to Lowe (2017), humans are not isolated individuals because they are connected through social networks. This interconnectivity means that individual actions impact others and vice versa, affecting behavior, growth, development, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and value systems (Lowe, 2017). Even without physical proximity, humans can influence each other with behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs through social networks, which can act as a contagion like a disease (Lowe, 2017). Values, beliefs, alcoholism, depression, happiness, and

even eating preferences can all spread through social networks (Lowe, 2017). As such, social

networks can have an impact on social and spiritual growth and development (Lowe, 2017).

A social network involves the connections between people, their interactions, and the

resulting impact on each other (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). As members of the body of Christ grow in

their faith and connect with each other, a contagion effect occurs (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Social

networks can either reflect uniformity or diversity, depending on the connections between

individuals (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Social network analysis has found that people within a social

network influence each other in various ways (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Developing reciprocal

relationships not only benefits social development, but also physical, psychological, spiritual,

emotional, and moral development (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). An individual's position within social

networks and relationships with others can lead to mutual whole-person development (Lowe &

Lowe, 2018). However, lacking social connections can result in negative outcomes (Lowe &

Lowe, 2018).

Digital Technologies

Some individuals argue that digital venues undermine traditional forms of community

and the leader's role of promoting spiritual development (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). However, others

view the activities of online participants as an indicator of the desire and intention to further their

growth (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). For example, while institutions may believe they are the main

thrust for a student's growth and development, the community in which the student lives and

works in everyday real life contributes most significantly to the overall formation (Lowe &

Lowe, 2018; Palka, 2004). One of the changes to the educational landscape has been the growth

and application of collaborative learning models found in social media sites (Lowe & Lowe,

2018). There is a growing sense in which individuals essentially live out their lives online (Lowe

& Lowe, 2018). An ecological perspective of community integrates several interconnected variables and recognizes the multiple layers of influence on that system (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Growing together online requires the interdependence and interaction between the self and the communities in which one lives, serves, and learns (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

The online community represents a unique form of social relations that is reshaping how people see and interact with others (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Seeing the kingdom of God as a network provides a framework for how Christians interact with God, others, and the world (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Christians need to reconsider who and where their neighbors are in a networked world as well as how to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly in a networked culture (Campbell & Garner, 2016). There is a growing awareness that new media practices are becoming embedded in daily lives as the internet is integrated increasingly into daily and spiritual routines (Campbell & Garner, 2016). The Internet has been used for a variety of religious practices and activities for over three decades (Campbell & Garner, 2016). Networked religion is a concept that highlights how religion has been informed by the nature of the network society and the social-technical structures that support it (Campbell & Garner, 2016). The concept of networked religion shows how current religious narratives, practices, and structures can become increasingly flexible, transitional, and transnational as they are lived out both in online communities and traditional congregations (Campbell & Garner, 2016).

Laufer et al. (2021) explored the effects of technology on higher education and examined the claims that digital education promotes access, learning, and collaboration. Contradictions in the promises and realities of digital education in higher education systems were acknowledged and addressed (Laufer et al., 2021). There are opportunities and barriers at the individual and

institutional levels, including access, devices, infrastructure, systemic inequalities, and government support (Laufer et al., 2021).

The Barna surveys reveal how influential the media can be in shaping public sentiment. Barna and Pepperdine University surveyed Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Elders regarding media portrayals of pastors to determine how Americans' personal experiences compare with pop-culture pastors (Barna, 2018). The media portrayals of pastors, priests, and other ministers in 7th Heaven, The Simpsons, The Exorcist, Run-DMC, Fred Phelps, Footloose, The Princess Bride, and Firefly were compared with Americans' personal experiences for similarity (Barna, 2018). Another survey compared media portrayal of Christian ministers with real-life experiences of all U.S. adults, practicing Christians, de-churched adults, and "nones" (Barna, 2018). Only 48% of adults report that their experience with church leaders has been better than the stereotypes they have seen in the media (Barna, 2017). According to Barna (2012), seven main areas influence society: movies, music, television, books, the internet, law, and family. The second tier of influencers includes entities like schools, peers, newspapers, radio, and businesses (Barna, 2012). Unfortunately, the local church is considered to have little or no influence on society, according to Barna (2012).

The rise of digital technologies after centuries of focus on written words and learning through books gave rise to the power of still and animated images that have changed today's learning experience (Trozzo, 2021). There has been a pendulum swing between visual images and word-based communications during the time of ancient Hebrew people, the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the 1900s (Trozzo, 2021). Recommendations can be made based on trends in technological innovations and means of communication throughout history (Trozzo, 2021). Educators should consider the barriers that

may inadvertently undo the benefits of using visual media (Trozzo, 2021). Educators should also consider the three learning domains of body, mind, and emotions that can be applied to every setting (Trozzo, 2021). New media creators should want to engage the different learning domains (Trozzo, 2021). Educators should ask, "Can the recipients clearly hear and see the medium? Are the language and symbols understandable as well as diverse? Are the learners ready to receive the message (motivation, sensitivity of topic, graphic nature)?" (Trozzo, 2021, p. 54).

The paradigm shift for educators and learners in today's modern society needs to accommodate the speed and fragmentation associated with how much and how fast things are happening (Trozzo, 2021). The effect of changing technologies on the culture and the educational processes for Christian educators have been experienced by Christians throughout history (Trozzo, 2021). There are parallel trends between the Middle Ages and today regarding children's roles, the single lifestyle, plurality, fortress mentality, Bible illiteracy, non-formal educational means, and visual communication (Trozzo, 2021). Changing technologies over time include chalkboards, single overhead projectors, typewriters, communal radio/television, newspapers, books and encyclopedia, and paper-bound Bibles (Trozzo, 2021). The current tools and practices have shifted towards smartboards, multiple display screens, computers, copiers, individual screens and earbuds, digital images, Google and Wikipedia, and Bible apps on mobile devices (Trozzo, 2021). Education ministries should adapt methods of communicating content and experiences to available digital technologies (Trozzo, 2021).

Online Church

A 2023 Pew Research Center survey found that around 25% of adults in the United States regularly view religious services through online or television platforms (Faverio et al., 2023). Additionally, the majority of these individuals reported feeling highly satisfied with the

experience (Faverio et al., 2023). Online churches share a common set of features that include community, commitment, friendships, prayer, and a form of church service (Hutchings, 2017). The online church communities develop social interactions that are sustained and mutual (Hutchings, 2017). Online followers develop strong commitments and friendships that foster a sense of belonging and shared identity (Hutchings, 2017). Online churches usually pray together in real-time and asynchronously (Hutchings, 2017). The prayer events may turn into a form of church service that is a combination of prayer, preaching, music, images, and liturgy (Hutchings, 2017). The three features of community, belonging, and prayer are typically present in online churches (Hutchings, 2017). They are foundational in determining whether an online group labeled as a church can truly be regarded as a church (Hutchings, 2017). Participants may not fully understand or participate in the features of community, belonging, and prayer (Hutchings, 2017). Some may disagree with the online group's label of church and refuse to acknowledge the group as a real congregation (Hutchings, 2017). Digital religion and online churches must balance their integration with social networks and their isolation from those networks (Hutchings, 2017). Participants value open communication and the boundaries that protect their privacy (Hutchings, 2017).

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

In this literature review, the focus was on three frameworks related to church growth and revitalization. The first section examined the theological basis of church growth and Christian leadership. The second section covered theoretical aspects of church growth, the decline of Christianity, and relevant leadership theories. Finally, the last section delved into various church growth and revitalization topics.

The rationale for this study has two main concerns. Firstly, it seeks to emphasize the significance of maintaining a healthy church. Numerous authors and researchers have explored the idea of church growth and revitalization. A healthy church is ideal and pursued by many church leaders (Chand, 2010; Dever, 2013; Eckhardt & Wagner, 2017; Goodhew, 2016; Henard, 2015; Mohler, 2015; Paas, 2016; Rainer, 2014; Rainer, 2020; Trimble, 2019). Understanding historical, analytical, and biblical approaches to church growth and revitalization leads to a fuller understanding of those topics in the contemporary context. Leadership, ministry, relationship, and management skills evolve as people commit to grow and start to act (Wagner et al., 1998). It is important to determine how church leaders can effectively grow their churches in numbers and spiritual maturity. This qualitative study will reveal several practical implications for stakeholders dedicated to sustaining a healthy church.

Secondly, it aligns with Barna's (2018) recommendation to conduct research on a local level to gain insight into the community's experiences and compare them with the general population. The broad context may not represent what is happening in specific regions and cultural pockets. Barna (2018) recommends supplementing research in the general population with research on a more local context to better understand and compare those experiences with the broader community. Various studies have been conducted on Baptist churches in North Carolina. Mohler (2015) researched the revitalization of First Baptist Church in Durham, while Castillo (2021) studied leadership practices among Hispanic Southern Baptist churches. Harris (2020) analyzed the impact of Sunday School participation on spiritual formation in African-American Baptist churches, and Santos (2015) looked into the disciple-making practices of Hispanic Southern Baptist pastors. Additionally, Allmond (2019) explored the revitalization of The Gathering in Surf City. However, research on lived experiences remains limited. This study

explored how pastors and ministry leaders describe the growth of their churches based on their personal experiences.

Through examination of the literature, it has been identified that there is a lack of information regarding the lived experiences of pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina. To address this gap, a qualitative study was conducted to gather accounts of activities, qualities, and perspectives from Southern Baptist pastors and ministry leaders in the region. During the interviews, topics such as church revitalization, numerical expansion, church leadership, the role of technology, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the perspectives of pastors and ministry leaders on church growth and revitalization were discussed. This contributed to the empirical data supporting theories on these topics. This study aimed to enhance the understanding of experiences within the wider community by complementing the existing research conducted on the general population. This research emphasized the significance of maintaining a healthy church by supplementing the current investigations with research on a more local context.

Profile of the Current Study

This study on church growth and revitalization attempts to fill the literature gap in the important area of church health. The research focused on the personal experiences of pastors and ministry leaders and their efforts to grow and revitalize churches in the coastal region of North Carolina. A qualitative study was carried out, utilizing phenomenological techniques. The following chapter will provide a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The third chapter of this doctoral dissertation is a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology that will be employed to complete the study. It delves into the details of the population, sampling technique, and data collection plan that was utilized to gather the necessary information. The chapter provides an overview of the research problem, purpose statement, and research questions, giving a clear picture of what the study aims to achieve. The research design and methodology are presented in a detailed and easily understandable manner, making it possible to replicate the plan. Additionally, the chapter includes information on the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, data collection methods, and data analysis.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

Establishing Christian communities in a secular and post-Christian society presents challenges, as Barna (2018) and Paas (2016) noted. Despite a desire for a healthy and growing church, many Christian leaders struggle to understand the characteristics of such a church and how to achieve it (Chand, 2010; Dever, 2013; Eckhardt & Wagner, 2017; Goodhew, 2016; Paas, 2016; Rainer, 2014; Rainer, 2020). Simply observing what is happening in the broader population may not accurately reflect what is happening in specific areas. Qualitative studies are necessary to capture and study the complexity of church growth and revitalization phenomena that may vary in different regions and cultural pockets.

To better understand the experiences in the broader community, Barna (2018) suggests conducting research on a local level in addition to general population research. This study explored how pastors and ministry leaders describe their lived experiences with church growth

and revitalization in their congregations, providing valuable insights into the topic. Understanding the historical, analytical, and biblical approaches to church growth and revitalization is crucial to fully comprehending these concepts in today's context. It is important to determine how church leaders can effectively grow their congregations in numbers and spiritual maturity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. Church growth and revitalization are defined as overcoming the threshold of decline and moving towards a season of strength and multiplication. Numerous factors contribute to the phenomenon, and it is valuable to reveal why it occurred. This study explored and described the phenomena according to the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders of Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The theory guiding this study was Rainer's (2020) central thesis about revived churches, which suggests that these churches opted for change in order to thrive. When faced with the decision between making significant changes in their churches or facing the possibility of demise, many church leaders and members opt for the latter (Rainer, 2020). The process of implementing changes can be difficult, slow, and often requires sacrifice (Rainer, 2020). However, it is important for churches to adapt to cultural shifts and actively engage with the changing world rather than withdrawing (Rainer, 2020).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding church growth and revitalization?

RQ2. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of leadership in church growth and revitalization?

RQ3. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role, if any, of digital technology in church growth and revitalization?

RQ4. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in church growth and revitalization?

RQ5. What are the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders related to church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina?

Research Design and Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research design. This researcher chose a qualitative design because of the interest in understanding participants' lived experiences and how they experience the phenomena of church growth and revitalization. People perceive the significance embedded in their daily routines through their "bodies, language, habits, things, social interactions, and physical environments" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 215). However, individuals seldom contemplate their potential to comprehend and react to the intricacy of such experiences (Van Manen, 2014). The nature of dialogue and personal interviews provided rich and thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences within their churches. The open-ended questions sought to explore and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to phenomena that are occurring or have previously occurred in their congregations.

The standard methods used to conduct qualitative studies include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, Yin (2016) identified seven other specialized types or variants of qualitative research: action research, arts-based research, autoethnography, critical theory, discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, and oral history. This study's qualitative research design utilized phenomenological methods to explore church growth and revitalization. The interviews involved

semi-structured and open-ended questions, addressing all the individual research questions that draw out the views and opinions of the research participants. Phenomenology seeks to understand the experienced meanings of the subject's life world (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). It is a way to understand the experiences and meanings behind them (Van Manen, 2014). The focus is on the participant's perspective, and the researcher must have extensive experience with them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Lester, 1999; Roberts, 2010). In this type of research, the researcher becomes the instrument for analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; MacGregor, 2018).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences in their churches, personal interviews, and dialogues were utilized. This researcher asked open-ended questions, allowing individuals to express their own interpretations of events that have taken place in their congregations. During the interview process, it was important for this researcher to remain silent and allow the participant to speak freely. The method of interviewing requires "learning to be silent so an informant can speak" (Barritt et al., 1985, p. 54). Through this dialogue, this researcher was able to see the experience from the participant's perspective, which revealed new insights and highlighted areas that required further investigation. Through dialogue, the researcher gains a better understanding of the participant's experience from their perspective (Barritt, 1944).

Setting

This study focused on Southern Baptist churches in the Southeastern region of the United States, particularly those located along Topsail Island in coastal North Carolina. According to Barna (2018), it is suggested to conduct research not only on the general population but also on a more local level in order to gain a better understanding and comparison of experiences within the

larger community. For example, one church in this region experienced significant growth in recent years. Allmond (2019) reported that there was only one youth member in one of the Southern Baptist churches within the region of interest in 2010. The next youngest member was a 47-year-old woman who had been part of the church her entire life (Allmond, 2019). However, between 2010 and 2019, the congregation grew from 50 to 500 attendees (Allmond, 2019).

The study encompassed churches that operate all year round and are situated within a 50-mile radius between Wilmington and Jacksonville, which are both coastal cities. This area is known for its tourist attractions and comprises the communities of North Topsail Beach, Surf City, and Topsail Beach. The participants' culture and environment involve seasonal tourists, military families, and a permanent population. These churches have pastors, ministry leaders, and administrative teams that include trustees/boards of directors, deacons, church clerks, and treasurers. They hold Sunday morning services and provide ministries for children, young adults, men, women, and senior adults throughout the week. Additionally, there are opportunities to participate in various ministry teams, such as music and missions.

<div align="center">

Participants

</div>

The population of this study consisted of all pastors and ministry leaders in Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The selection of participants was made through criterion sampling, a method that involves analyzing cases that meet specific predetermined criteria for importance (Patton, 1990). The primary objective of this approach is to examine cases that are likely to be "information-rich" (Patton, 1990, p. 177).

The researcher has opted to work with a limited number of participants based on available resources for in-depth exploration, with a target sample size of ten to twelve full-time pastors or ministry leaders. Semi-structured and open-ended questions were utilized to obtain

participants' views and opinions, with the interview sessions lasting approximately one hour. Phenomenological researchers depend almost exclusively on lengthy interviews with a carefully selected sample of participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Tesch, 1994). Additionally, this study did not utilize stratification based on individual characteristics.

Role of the Researcher

It is crucial to choose a role that is meaningful and familiar to the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This researcher chose a role that is accepted and understood in the world of pastors and ministry leaders. During the study, this researcher introduced himself as a fellow Christian, student, and supportive researcher to the participants. To build trust and avoid any misunderstandings, this researcher disclosed his formal credentials and emphasized that there would be no deception. This researcher focused on encouraging participants to express their concerns and priorities rather than engaging in confrontations, fact-checking, or questioning their expertise.

To conduct qualitative research, the researcher must delve into the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This involves becoming the instrument in a phenomenological study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; MacGregor, 2018). In this particular study, this researcher served as the human instrument. This researcher did not seek to prove that the participant's description of church growth and revitalization is valid. Instead, this researcher assumed that the description of church growth and revitalization provided by the participants was the experience of those phenomena. Additionally, this researcher was not responsible for assessing how effective the participants were in growing and revitalizing their church.

In 2019, this researcher started attending a Southern Baptist church located in coastal North Carolina. After hearing about the history of the SBC church that he is embedded in, this researcher became interested in church growth and revitalization. This researcher is actively involved with the worship ministry and weekly small group meetings. Since starting this doctorate program, the lead pastor invited this researcher to start attending weekly staff meetings to learn more about the administrative functions of the church. In January 2023, this researcher was ordained as a deacon. To mitigate bias and lack of objectivity, the study excluded this researcher's organization. When researchers have personally experienced the topic that they are investigating, they may struggle to consider other viewpoints (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). To prevent this researcher's own preconceptions or experiences from influencing the data collection process, he used techniques like bracketing or epoché. This researcher also needed to be aware that his presence can potentially introduce bias in the responses and that the participants are not "equally articulate and perceptive" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 188).

In this phenomenological study, this researcher planned the approach to data recording and identified the procedures employed before entering the field. This researcher transcribed interview recordings, field notes, and observations. Additionally, this researcher was responsible for data management strategies regarding data storage, format conversion, backup copies, version, access, and security control.

Ethical Considerations

The research in this study involved human participants and required prior approval from an institutional review board. The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a "federally mandated body whose purpose is to ensure ethical treatment of research subjects" (Liberty University, 2022, p. 25). The research in this study did not begin before receiving IRB

approval, and this researcher did not collect data before obtaining all necessary and full IRB

approvals.

Leedy and Ormrod (2016) categorize ethical issues in research as protection from harm,

voluntary and informed participation, right to privacy, and honesty with professional colleagues.

For this study, this researcher did not expose the participants to unnecessary physical or

psychological harm. Research participants knew the nature of the study to be conducted and had

the choice to participate. Informed consent forms were developed based on the standard elements

Leedy & Ormrod (2016) listed. The consent forms contained the provisions of the study and

standard elements that acknowledge the protection of human rights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The study considered confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy to protect the participants'

identities. The study utilized pseudonyms instead of real names to keep the nature and quality of

the participant's performance confidential. The electronic data collection, recording, and analysis

devices that were used in the study required passwords and biometric authentication.

Furthermore, this researcher reported findings honestly without misrepresenting or intentionally

misleading others.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

A qualitative design was chosen for this study because beliefs and perceptions regarding

church growth, church revitalization, leadership, digital technologies, the role of the Holy Spirit,

and the lived experiences of pastors and ministry leaders would be difficult to assess

quantitatively. Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand the meaning individuals or

groups ascribe to phenomena that are occurring or have previously occurred (Creswell, 2013;

Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormrod, 2016; MacGregor, 2018; Yin, 2016). A

qualitative approach is suitable since it can help to capture and study the complexity of the

phenomena addressed in this study. The philosophical term associated with the qualitative

approach is phenomenology (Roberts, 2010). Among the standard methods used to conduct

qualitative studies, phenomenology was utilized in this research. Phenomenology seeks a deep

understanding of an individual's world from their unique perspective (Kvale & Brinkmann,

2015). It places particular emphasis on their personal experiences (Roberts, 2010). Qualitative

research requires the researcher to remain deeply engaged with the participants as the instrument

for doing the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Phenomenologists determine what an

experience means for individuals who have had the experience and provide a comprehensive

description of it (Moustakas, 1994).

Collection Methods

To conduct this phenomenological study, this researcher used interviews as the primary

tool to gather data. This researcher created an interview protocol for asking questions and

recording answers, using audio recordings as the primary data collection technique. During the

interviews, this researcher also took handwritten notes for reflexive thoughts. After each

interview, this researcher comprehensively recorded field notes without bias, which were

reviewed and refined for accuracy. The audio recordings were transcribed into written transcripts

for analysis. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and each interview with a participant

lasted approximately one hour. The study used semi-structured and open-ended questions to

encourage participants to share their views and opinions.

Instruments and Protocols

Consistent with phenomenological research, this study collected data through lengthy and

in-depth interviews with a carefully selected sample of participants. When conducting in-depth

interviews, researchers should ask three types of questions: main questions, probes, and follow-

up questions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). The study used a mix of main questions, probes, and

follow-up questions to gather thorough information that answers the research questions. This

approach ensured a well-rounded and detailed data collection that addressed the research

questions of this study.

Conversational guides such as protocols, jottings, checklists, and outlines are used to aid

the research process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this study, this researcher created an interview

protocol to provide a "mental framework" for conducting the phenomenological research (Yin,

2016, p. 108). This protocol was a conversational guide to help this researcher stay on track with

what questions to ask during the interview. It also served as a general roadmap for the interview,

preventing the researcher from getting lost in follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The

protocol helped the data collection process achieve convergence and triangulation (Yin, 2016).

Interviews

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with a fixed questionnaire containing

detailed questions. Interviews were conducted in person. Each interview lasted approximately

one hour. Probes and follow-up questions were also used to gather additional information. The

interviews aimed to gain insight into the participants' everyday experiences and their

understanding of topics related to church growth, revitalization, and leadership concepts. This

researcher engaged in a one-on-one conversation with each participant and maintained a

conversational tone to encourage open responses. Participants in a qualitative interview may feel

as if they are "engaging in a friendly chat with the researcher" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016, p. 264).

The aim is to obtain descriptions of the participants' perspectives on the topics specific to each of

the research questions. This researcher guided the interview to ensure it stayed on topic, but he

did not follow a script. Structured interviews carefully script the interviewer's interaction with

the participants based on prior training aimed at uniform data collection practices (Yin, 2016).

The semi-structured interview obtained descriptions of the participants' "lived world" according

to their interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p.

31). Handwritten notes and audio recordings were used to document the interviews. An iPhone

13 was used for the face-to-face interviews. Only this researcher conducted interviews and

transcribed them for analysis.

Procedures

After receiving approval from the IRB, this researcher started recruiting participants for

the study through phone calls, texts, and emails. Interested participants received a consent form

with details about the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants must agree in writing

beforehand. During the interviews, this researcher recorded audio and took notes, which were

transcribed for analysis. The interviews were conducted in a quiet, undisturbed location to ensure

accuracy. This researcher stored his notes in a locked drawer while recordings and personally

identifiable information were stored on a password and biometric authentication-protected

computer. Backup copies of research documents and data were kept in a secure cloud storage

location accessible only to this researcher.

To ensure the integrity of the data collected, this researcher implemented data

management strategies such as storage, format conversion, backup copies, authenticity and

version control, and access and security control. This researcher also considered ethical

considerations, including honesty, subjectivity, integrity, and informed consent. To protect the

identities of study participants, confidentiality and privacy measures were employed. The study

used pseudonyms instead of real names to maintain confidentiality. Audio recordings were only

played back in a secure and private location. The data collected was analyzed, and conclusions were drawn.

Data Analysis

This study's research methodology involved conducting phenomenological interviews to gather data. Through careful analysis, this researcher identified themes and drew meaningful conclusions addressing the research questions. This method helped to better understand the subjects being studied and provided valuable insights into the topic of church growth and revitalization.

Analysis Methods

The phenomenological data analysis process involves analyzing the data for significant phrases, developing and clustering meanings into themes, and presenting a comprehensive phenomenon description (Creswell, 2013). This researcher transcribed the interviews by himself. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) define transcriptions as "constructions from an oral conversation to a written text" (p. 210). All of the data was organized carefully using word-processing software and then disassembled through a formal coding procedure. When coding, the researcher must identify and label the relevant "concepts, themes, events, and examples" in the transcripts that relate to the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 189). The data was reassembled according to emerging themes, patterns, and relationships. Using inductive reasoning, qualitative researchers sort and categorize a large body of information into a small set of underlying themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). After interpreting the findings, this researcher combined the analysis and summarized the data to capture the broader significance of the study.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers do not use the term validity to describe their research (Leedy &

Ormrod, 2016). In qualitative research, trustworthiness is used, and it comprises credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These trustworthiness criteria answer questions regarding truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Schwandt et al., 2007). The trustworthiness of a study needs to be addressed at the beginning of the planning stage (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is an analog to internal validity (Schwandt et al., 2007). Creating a strong sense of trustworthiness builds credibility (Yin, 2016). Phenomenological research is concerned with "capturing the uniqueness of events" (Yin, 2016, p. 20). The study aimed to be as accurate as possible in reflecting participants' lived experiences as described in their own words. Additionally, qualitative researchers need to create an accurate account of people's lived experiences (MacGregor, 2018). In this study, this researcher depicted reality based on the participants' perspectives, with honesty in self-evaluation and in revealing any predispositions. Other techniques for ensuring credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Dependability

Dependability is an analog to reliability (Schwandt et al., 2007). Credibility ensures dependability (MacGregor, 2018). Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time and in changing research contexts (MacGregor, 2018). Schwandt et al. (2007) suggest establishing an audit trail of the research process as a strategy for dependability. This researcher provided sufficient information so others can repeat the research design protocol in their context.

Confirmability

Confirmability is an analog to objectivity (Schwandt et al., 2007). It refers to the researcher's neutrality when interpreting data (MacGregor, 2018). It is the extent to which findings are determined by the participants rather than the researcher's bias (MacGregor, 2018). The techniques for assessing confirmability include an audit, triangulation, and reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). This researcher exhibited heightened self-awareness and control of one's bias. This researcher ensured that others can corroborate findings and that personal values do not take over.

Transferability

Transferability is analogous to external validity (Schwandt et al., 2007). It refers to the degree to which findings can be applied to other contexts or settings (MacGregor, 2018). Transferability is possible through thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). This researcher adequately described the context, enabling the reader to determine whether the findings are relevant to their own context. Moreover, this researcher provided detailed descriptions of both the context and the participants, allowing others to determine the applicability of the conclusions to their own settings.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the research problem, the research purpose, and the research questions that guided the study. The chapter describes the research design, including details on the setting, participants, the role of the researcher, and ethical considerations. The data collection method used is also explained, along with the rationale for selecting it. Moreover, the chapter discusses how interviews are utilized in phenomenological research and how the interview protocol was developed. A thorough explanation is provided of how data was coded, analyzed,

and safeguarded, with steps taken to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, the chapter has outlined

the IRB approval process and how trustworthiness issues were addressed.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding church growth and revitalization?

RQ2. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of leadership in church growth and revitalization?

RQ3. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role, if any, of digital technology in church growth and revitalization?

RQ4. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in church growth and revitalization?

RQ5. What are the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders related to church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina?

Chapter Four presents the compilation protocol and measures utilized to gather and analyze data. Additionally, the demographic and sample data are thoroughly outlined. The results of the data analysis are then presented, methodically organized by research question and corresponding themes and categories. Finally, the research design is evaluated.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The data compilation process began with organizing the interview recordings. Each recording was transferred from an iPhone to a MacBook Pro and organized into distinct files. To ensure confidentiality, the files were named without the use of personal identifiers. Each interview recording was transcribed with attention to detail using Microsoft Word to maintain accuracy, and the transcriptions were then coded using the same tool. These codes were organized into broader categories, which were subsequently grouped into themes that were

relevant to the research question. Using inductive reasoning, this researcher sorted and categorized the data into a smaller set of underlying themes, as recommended by Leedy and Ormrod (2016). The codes were generated through an analysis of the data itself, rather than being predetermined. This researcher then organized the data into 11 emerging themes, with subheadings representing 45 different categories. Finally, this researcher analyzed the findings to produce a comprehensive summary that highlighted the study's significance.

Demographic and Sample Data

The study included ten pastors and ministry leaders who were associated with Southern Baptist churches in the coastal region of North Carolina. These churches were spread across a 50-mile area between two coastal cities and had a variety of facilities, ranging from worship buildings on church grounds to those that utilized public school facilities outside of school hours. The participants were from year-round churches located between Wilmington and Jacksonville, with the majority situated in a tourist destination that included the communities of North Topsail Beach, Surf City, and Topsail Beach. Congregation sizes varied from 100 to over 500 and were largely made up of white members. The participants' cultural and environmental experiences were shaped by a combination of seasonal tourists, military families, and permanent residents. Appendices D, E, and F contain interview instruments. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used.

Interview Participants

Liam. Liam, who is about 40 years old, works with children and directs a program at his church serving around 150 people. He feels called to a higher biblical ministry.

Noah. Noah leads the music at a church with over 500 people in attendance. He is also around 40 years old. He shared that he grew up at a United Methodist Church.

Olivia. Olivia is another worship leader from the same church as Noah, and she coordinates the music for a different church. She also plays guitar and is around 40 years old.

Hayden. Hayden is a pastor at a church with around 250 members. He is over 50 years old and has an associate degree.

Mason. Mason is a worship leader and works with the audio and visual team at a church with around 200 members. He is around 50 years old.

Brody. Brody is an ordained minister and runs an evangelistic organization. He is over 60 years old and has a doctoral degree.

Colby. Colby is a guitar and keyboard-playing worship leader for a church with over 500 attendees. He is around 40 years old. He shared that he grew up in a Baptist church.

Gavin. Gavin is a worship leader who used to be an associate pastor at a church that serves approximately 100 people. He is also around 40 years old.

Payton. Payton leads activities for young people and has plans to create a retreat center for them. She is around 45 years old, and her church serves approximately 200 people. She was previously involved with an Episcopal Church before becoming Southern Baptist.

Joanne. Joanne is involved in music and Bible studies. She is over 60 years old and has a master's degree. Her church has over 500 attendees.

Data Analysis and Findings

RQ1. Beliefs About Church Growth and Revitalization

RQ1 asked: "What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding church growth and revitalization?" The themes that emerged from this research question include *Shepherding a Church Community*, *Focus on Outreach and Community*, and *Willingness to Change*.

Shepherding a Church Community

Sound Biblical Teaching. The participants emphasized the importance of sound biblical

teaching in churches. Liam shared his belief that the Lord desires for people to come together to

worship and celebrate rather than enforce rules like a dress code. He recalled having a

conversation with a head Deacon about a hat issue and how enforcing rules like a dress code can

push people out of the church. Liam said, "The Lord doesn't care what you wear. He said,

'Come as you are.'" He pointed out that it does not say anywhere in the Bible to dress your best.

He believes it says to have the best heart. He said, "It doesn't say to put on or take off a hat or

any kind of clothing. The Lord says, 'Come as you are.'" Liam said,

> Peter says in Chapter 3, "Don't adorn with jewelry and clothes and the things of beauty to
> show your beauty. Be adorned with the spirit, with your heart, with love…" He also says,
> "Likewise husbands…" So, he is concerned about your heart. It's not about what you
> wear because if it was about what you wear, then God would be a God of fashion… He
> cares about your heart.

Mason and Brody agreed on aligning church teachings with biblical principles and sound

doctrine. According to Brody,

> My perspective on the church being revived has to come strictly from an evangelistic
> effort that knows its main goal is to bring new believers back into the church, and then
> for the church to understand that that's what's reviving them, not their own internal
> programs or an internal revival that lasted a week. That's not the way it happened in the
> New Testament. It didn't happen like that. So, we have to get back to a biblical
> understanding of how the church grew, in my opinion.

He suggested that the best way to revive a church is to focus on the teachings of the New

Testament rather than relying on Western cultural practices. He noted that if the church chooses

to operate within a Western cultural context, it may be inclined to start programs or other

initiatives. He questioned whether the organized church in Western culture is truly focused on

evangelism.

According to Gavin, strong leaders with a biblical vision are essential for church revitalization. He believes that a pastor called to lead a church will have a vision that aligns with the Bible and is supported by fellow leaders and elders in the church. With a clear vision and mission, it becomes easier to discern actions that serve God's purposes in the church from those that do not.

For Payton, the decision for a church to remain true to its beliefs holds great significance. She believes that conveying a message that is not rooted in the Bible alters God's standards. She mentioned that it is natural to question the truthfulness of the information presented to us. She believes it is crucial to stand for what you believe in and not compromise your values. Payton argued that if a message that is not biblical is put out there, then "you're changing God's standards… If you're not going to stand for what you stood for, then what are you standing for?"

Focus on Jesus. The participants emphasized the importance of focusing on Jesus and building a healthy church centered around Him. According to Gavin, Jesus said, "You will know a tree by its fruit." Gavin believes that a healthy church plays a crucial role in nurturing relationships, spiritual growth, serving opportunities, and unity, with Jesus at the center. He is convinced that good fruit, such as good works, strong friendships, and sincere worship, is produced by a healthy church. Liam, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of focusing on the Lord and building strong relationships centered around Him. Liam highlighted how people in religious institutions sometimes put too much emphasis on rules and regulations instead of focusing on the Lord and building a strong relationship with Him. Liam also cautioned how arguments and disputes over little things like someone's hat can push people away from the church and lead them to lose their trust in the Lord.

Hayden believes that individuals and the community of believers should constantly consider their ways and focus on Jesus, without being swayed by external distractions. He shared that he recently delivered a sermon on considering one's ways:

> I preached on Peter in John 21 where the Lord confronted Peter and restored him, the three "Do you love me?" [questions]. And at the end, and then after that, the Lord told Peter how he was going to die. And then Peter immediately looked away at John and said, "What about him?" you know? The Lord wants us to keep our focus on [the Lord], not what's going on around us. He wants us to focus on him and let him lead us, and then we follow.

He mentioned that believers should make a public stand for what they believe in, while also showing love and compassion to those who do not share their beliefs. Hayden stressed the significance of doing what is right, which is to show love and understanding to others so they can know Jesus. According to Gavin, "It's very simple. The more a church lifts the name of Jesus, worships Jesus, talks about Jesus, prays, and seeks the knowledge of Christ, the more a church grows spiritually and numerically." Gavin loosely paraphrased a quote from Jesus, stating that the powers of hell will not triumph against such a faithful church.

Brody brought up that some churches focus on whether an effort will contribute to the church and provide a return on investment. He said,

> We lack ears to hear and eyes to see. We are trying to run these organizations like a business, to the point we even have started using the word *branding* or say, "Come to our church – you've never seen a move of God like this." Well, yes, we have. We've seen it all over the world. But we use these sayings to make our church more important than the Kingdom. So, when you have to see others before yourself, as church members, it means that we have to do something and give of our time and money, and the Bible even goes as far as that we must sacrifice some of our family members, our brothers, and sisters. I mean, it's pretty strenuous to put yourself aside, especially if you want your church to grow. You want to look at that as your focus, and the church can't be that organized center. It has to be kingdom-centered, missiology-centered.

Gavin shared his thoughts on what a struggling church looks like and said it is "unfortunately, a very easy question to answer in this day and age." He noted that you could recognize a church

that is struggling when there is gossip, judgment, and a lack of compassion among groups of people within the church. He believes when disagreements arise over trivial things like music and finances, and when the focus is on anything but Jesus and His supernatural power, it becomes clear that the church is not thriving spiritually. He emphasized the importance of staying focused on Jesus as the leader of the church and trusting in His power to heal and unite the church body.

Avoid Going Through the Motions. Participants highlighted the significance of avoiding going through the motions. According to Payton, if the church is only going through the motions, it could be cause for concern. She said, "It's no programs, no outreach, no nothing. If they're just there to be there, just to make face, you know, like if it's just for face value, I feel like it's probably not healthy." Noah shared a similar sentiment about a church experience that felt stagnant and unhealthy. He described feeling like they are just going through the motions of tradition rather than truly worshiping Christ. He mentioned that the atmosphere was quiet, and children were not allowed to speak up, which contributed to the stagnant feeling. He said, "I guess you could say you're just going through the P's and Q's because that's what you've always done since you were younger. And it doesn't seem healthy to me. It just seems stagnant." Hayden believes that going through the motions without joy or a heart that is sold out is not effective since others will see right through it. He said,

> If we're not careful, we'll get into that part where we're just going through the motions. And here's what happens, they realize you're just going through the motions. They see through it. They see through it. If you're just going through the motions, they see through it, you know. If it's not being done with joy, if it's not being done with a heart that's just sold out to Jesus, they see through that. They know. They watch.

Mason emphasized that no one appreciates someone who lacks passion or enthusiasm, whether in a relationship or any other aspect of life. Unfortunately, Mason observed that when

people do find themselves just going through the motions, they may turn to alcohol, drugs, or other vices to fill the void that their lack of engagement has created. However, he believes that discovering your passion, whether it is music, art, or anything else, can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment that cannot be found through any other means. For Mason, his passion lies in music, and he feels that he has been anointed by God to use it to glorify Him. Embracing this purpose and using music to worship God is a blessing, but if he allows music to consume him instead, it becomes a curse. Mason said that God is our first love, and everything else in life is secondary.

Spiritual Growth. The participants discussed different perspectives on spiritual growth in churches. Joanne believes that when a church is struggling to grow, it often indicates that some members may not be spiritually alive. This could stem from leadership or congregants themselves. Liam emphasized the importance of spiritual growth, which he believes starts with the congregation rather than the pulpit. A church must abide by God's laws and have biblical principles to have spiritual growth, according to Liam. Mason thinks it is difficult to measure. He said, "I don't know if it can be measured in real-time. You can't look at somebody and go oh… Just because somebody has an anointing doesn't mean they're super giant in God." However, he thinks by paying attention to the attitudes and behaviors of those around you, you can gain a better understanding of how the Holy Spirit is working. Gavin believes people are drawn to the joy and unity of a healthy church while the judgment and lack of spiritual focus in an unhealthy one are a turn-off.

When describing a healthy local church in the community, Mason emphasized the importance of accountability, especially for the senior pastor. A good church should not be run by a single individual, but rather have true accountability to prevent any abuse of power. He said,

> There's a lot of churches where, and I mean true accountability, to where it's not like the pastor can lord it over the elder board, you know. He walks in there and says, "We want red today, don't we, boys!" and they go, "Yeah, red!" OK, not that kind of a thing.

Mason believes that accountability is crucial in establishing a system of checks and balances for one's personal growth. Without accountability, it can be difficult for a church to maintain a healthy state.

The participants also highlighted the importance of wisdom and considering the impact of one's actions. Joanne mentioned that many other activities compete for people's time on Sundays and Wednesdays, unlike in the past when churches were the only option. She believes it is important to consider our ways when following the Lord, instead of just focusing on cultural practices. Mason thinks that wisdom is often overlooked in favor of impulsive action. He has learned that rushing ahead without considering all aspects can have unintended consequences. With regard to Haggai 1:5 and considering one's ways, Mason said, "That's what you call wisdom. Most people just jump in. My mistakes in life are associated with getting ahead of God. That's what people say. 'You're ahead of God.' Back up. That's jumping in with both feet." He believes it is important to take a step back and consider the impact of our actions on others and our environment. Comparably, Payton suggested that sometimes, "You have to stop and maybe get a second opinion."

The participants shared their perspectives on what makes a healthy and thriving church. Colby feels that numbers are not an accurate indicator of a healthy church. He believes that a modern local church that is thriving is one where the members are continuously deepening their faith and spiritual connection. This is reflected in their conversations, which should not be stuck in the same routine of basic beliefs. Colby said, "If you met them year after year, they weren't having the same types of conversations." He said, "They aren't having the same 'Oh yeah, I'm

so excited I got saved!' They had their first fire of getting saved and discipleship, but then they dove deeper into the Word, into studies, into the message being deeper." He believes their passion for God's Word and teachings should be evident as they enhance their understanding and relationship with Him.

Similarly, Payton believes that in a struggling church, the message is only applicable to a small group of individuals. Colby believes that a lack of growth and a shallow message are unhealthy indications of a church. He thinks that the gospel message should be preached to visitors, but at some point, the church family needs something deeper. He compared a church with a shallow message to a marriage where the couple never talks about important things. He said,

> I feel like it's like a marriage where the couple never talks, and they never talk about the important things in life. It's always like, "Yeah how was your day. It was great." You know, like, "Oh, you had a good day at work. Wonderful. Great. What are we having for dinner tomorrow?" That's not a marriage. A marriage is… What can I do to you as my wife for you to feel more loved? How can we use those verses from the Bible all the time about how it is to give yourself up for someone, how to love someone like Christ loved the church?

He thinks that Jesus used many parables in his teachings because he wanted to go deeper and help people understand complex concepts. He noted that if Jesus simply told them to stop sinning and follow him, the New Testament would not have been so long. He gave another example of how Paul wrote so many letters to different churches. He believes that it shows that the world needs many local churches, rather than one big church with thousands of members. Colby initially felt overwhelmed by the number of churches in North Carolina, but now he sees it as a positive thing.

Additionally, the participants expressed their views on the measurement of a church's success. Colby believes that it should be gauged by the quality of the members' connection with

Christ and their loved ones, rather than its size. Meanwhile, Mason believes that a church's numerical growth is contingent upon God's anointing. For instance, a church in a great location might not necessarily be healthy if it lacks the anointing. He believes while a prime location may lead to good attendance, it does not always translate to a growing and healthy church. He noted that it is possible for a church to experience growth through a revolving door of members, but this does not necessarily equate to genuine spiritual growth. He believes it is important to focus on the qualities of the Holy Spirit, such as patience, kindness, and love, and observe how they are reflected in the actions of individuals within the church community.

Brody believes individuals within thriving churches possess an inherent drive that reflects their mission-oriented approach. He believes the church is not merely a program or structure, but instead is led by the Holy Spirit from the top down. According to Brody, these are the only churches that he has observed that are experiencing both numerical and spiritual growth, with a focus on depth before width. He said, "They're growing in numbers but they're not only growing in width, they have also already grown in depth prior to that width coming, not width first."

Focus on Outreach and Community

The Great Commission. Participants discussed the importance of fulfilling the Great Commission. Mason believes that churches can grow by running them like businesses, but he also thinks it is important to focus on making disciples and reaching out to others. He warned that simply preaching to the choir does not align with the teachings of the Bible. Mason said,

> If you want to have growth as you're objective, which I think as a church, health, and growth, you want them to be there. If you're just preaching to the choir all the time, I don't think the Bible calls you to do that. Go make disciples, you know.

Brody stressed the need to focus on evangelizing. He cautioned that revitalized churches may opt to remain within their four walls, and by doing so, they risk becoming insular and self-absorbed.

He believes that while it is important to nurture our families and our communities, the role of the church in Western culture should extend beyond self-preservation. Instead, He believes the church should look to evangelists to provide opportunities for people to fulfill their God-given purposes beyond attending church services. He said they need to "complete the purpose that God called them for, which was to not just be in church." Simply increasing attendance will not solve the problem. He believes the church must focus on evangelizing. Brody said the church has abundant resources, but many are not being used to further God's work. He believes that while it is commendable to be good stewards of our finances, we must not forget to support those who are spreading God's message to the world. He mentioned that the choice to remain insular is a choice to live internally driven. He said, "Well, they may choose to live inside, but as long as they continue to try to live inside, they're going to die within themselves."

Participants emphasized the importance of believers spreading Christ's message to create disciples. Olivia believes that the Tabernacle and its various elements are meant to represent the embodiment of Christ. She noted that the lampstand in Revelation 2, in particular, signifies the role of believers as representations of Christ, tasked with spreading his message and creating disciples. Olivia suggested that if believers are unable to fulfill this purpose in a way that honors Christ, their existence is rendered meaningless. She said,

> We are essentially the lampstand. We're the representation and the embodiment that's here to spread that Word. And if we can't, therefore, go and do that in a way that honors Him and creates more disciples, then what's our purpose?

Likewise, Joanne believes in the importance of maintaining a church's first love and fulfilling the Great Commission. She said,

> In many cases, we have had our churches, and we're happy to go and do church. We are happy to go worship, study, learn, and that sort of thing, but we forget that the Great Commission says to go out and disciple and baptize.

Outreach Ministry. Participants highlighted that a healthy church is one that is actively engaged in the community and has an outreach ministry. Payton believes that when a church is facing challenges, it may not be effectively connecting with its community. She said, "They're not reaching people the way that they should." As a result, there is a decrease in regular attendance. Joanne believes that losing our first love is significant because when churches or individuals lose their passion for Christ, they may become less inclined to reach out to others. Noah suggested that a healthy church is one that is actively engaged in the community and not just focused on its own four walls. He said, "They're spreading the gospel throughout the community both spiritually and through actual physical work, going out and doing volunteerism and stuff like that." Liam agreed, stating that a healthy church is plugged into the community, takes their worship outside the walls, and is welcoming to all. Mason believes a healthy church is one that is committed to serving its community and upholding biblical principles. He emphasized the importance of an outreach ministry, with members actively welcoming visitors. Like his mentor, Mason said, "He didn't have to feel like he had to go to some place like Africa to evangelize. He evangelized right there on the beach."

Next Generation. The participants believe that church health depends on youth outreach, successful youth groups, and strong children's ministry. According to Payton, a healthy church provides ministry options that cater to different age groups. Similarly, Joanne's perspective is that to truly grow, it is important to reach out to young parents and the youth. Noah thinks the strength of a church can be measured by the size and success of its youth group. Noah believes that a successful youth group indicates a healthy church, "If you've got a successful youth group and there's a lot of youth that's coming and everything, it seems like that's a healthy church to me." Liam emphasized that a healthy church must have the Holy Spirit within it and that a

struggling or dying church can be identified by the state of its children's ministry. Olivia mentioned that youth groups have an important role to play in teaching the next generation how to serve and lead. She said, "Our kids learn from us through what we do, and so they're going to end up being that next tier to come under us."

Mason also believes children's ministry is crucial, and a great one goes beyond simply providing entertainment for the kids. He noted that it must be well thought out and organized to ensure that children are receiving proper guidance and learning valuable lessons. He said, "You have to have a great children's ministry, not just like, put the kids in the corner and give them a ball, you know. I mean, it's something that's really thought out, really well put together." Joanne thinks having few young people in a church can be a challenge for its long-term survival as they are the ones who will carry on its traditions in the future. She said, "If you don't have children, your church is basically dying." Additionally, Joanne believes it is likely that the older ministers will eventually retire due to health or physical concerns. She thinks it is important to have younger individuals who are prepared to take over.

Focus on Relationships. The participants believe that maintaining a healthy church involves engaging with the community, being open and warm with children, serving others, and uplifting and supporting those around us. Payton emphasized the importance of drawing in new attendees. This can be achieved by actively engaging with the community and establishing outreach programs. Joanne stressed the significance of possessing an exceptional level of openness and warmth when working with children and young people, as this naturally draws them towards you. She believes that this is a quality that can be found in any church that practices love. According to Olivia, serving others is crucial, and Jesus demonstrated this not just with his words, but also with his actions. She said, "Jesus not only used his words, but he used

his hands and his feet, and so whenever it came down to it… there was an emotional attachment along with the things that he said." She believes that creating an emotional attachment through acts of service is vital and that teaching others how to serve is equally important. Mason believes that while it may not always be possible to foresee every detail, it is important to consider the boundaries of those around us and how we can positively contribute to their lives. He emphasized that it is not just about what we are capable of, but also how we can uplift and support those in our community. He said, "You have to really consider not just who you are and how God is using you and what you are capable of. You have to consider all the people that you're going to impact."

Welcoming to Everyone. The participants agreed that a thriving church is one that is warm, open, and spiritually vibrant. Gavin shared that for him, a sure sign of a healthy church is the sight of "genuine smiles on people's faces, and expressions of joy to be in God's house with others." Joanne believes that a thriving church is spiritually alive, welcoming, and loving towards all. Likewise, Hayden feels that a healthy local church is one that reaches the community regardless of color or nationality. He believes that church members should go out and talk about what God is doing in their lives and encourage others to come and experience the same change. He thinks the church should be like a family, welcoming and fulfilling for its members. Hayden is convinced that a church that is fulfilling and meaningful for its members will be a reward for the community, as they will talk about it and invite others to join. He believes that when people come to the church, they should feel welcomed and wanted, without any doubt that they are wanted there. He encourages members to invite others to come and worship with them and be present to welcome them when they do. A healthy church, he said, is one that thrives with Christ at its center and is not ashamed to show it. On the other hand, Joanne

has observed that it is common for struggling churches to be selective in their membership.

Ultimately, Hayden believes a healthy church lives its faith inside and outside the doors and

brings people in through their actions and words. Payton adds that it is not enough to merely talk

the talk; one must also walk the walk. She said it is like saying you dislike dogs, yet you end up

with ten.

Hayden believes that the key to a thriving church is being outwardly focused and

encouraging people to come and know Jesus. He said, "What I've seen mostly in dying churches

is that they don't want to be uncomfortable. In other words, 'us four, no more' is what I've

always said." Hayden explained further and said,

In other words, they've got their spot in the pew, and if they walk in and somebody's sitting in their spot, they get all bent out of shape. And you know, I've seen this happen many times. They don't like somebody to come in and try to change something… If you have new leadership and they come up with some idea or something. This happened in the church I was in... it plateaued, and one of the ways the Lord showed me it was time for me to leave, any new thing we started, the people were quick to raise their hand. "Yeah, let's do that!" and then when it came to putting feet up underneath it, you'd like, you'd go out to witness to people at a local park or something, and you don't have two or three to show up. So, it's kind of like, "Oh we're all in! We're all for it! Just don't ask us to participate." To me, that's a dying church.

Brody, on the other hand, recognized that many churches embrace the idea of welcoming

all individuals, including the unsaved, to attend their services. However, he emphasized the

importance of considering whether this aligns with biblical teachings. He believes the Bible

encourages believers to gather and worship together as a community of saints, and allowing a

large number of non-believers to attend could potentially disrupt the church's unity and mission.

He said, "If you have 50 believers and you have 200 people that are not truly converted, they will

destroy your church. They may pretend to be believers. They may be good people doing good."

He cautioned that some individuals may appear to be believers, but may not truly be converted.

Similarly, Mason mentioned that Jesus warned us to be wary of the Pharisees and their leaven.

Willingness to Change

Inevitability of Change. The participants agree that change is inevitable. They believe some churches resist it, but it is better to embrace it. Noah described his experience growing up in a church where change was not embraced. He said, "If they wanted the message to be this certain way, and if somebody went off that topic, eeeehrr, get rid of them. Get somebody that's going to preach our message." This was something that bothered Noah a lot. Unfortunately, he believes this type of resistance to change is still present in many churches today. Noah said that Jesus himself was not stagnant and went among all types of people, which is something that some churches should consider. He said,

> They try to bring in a youth pastor or they try to bring in a new music director. And if they're doing something a little different, they choose to die versus choose to change because they're stuck in tradition. And you know, Jesus wasn't stagnant. He didn't only preach to a certain type of people, you know. He went among the people, and he went and spoke to fishermen. He went and spoke to people in the town and the bar. He went, you know, and that's something that drives me crazy with some of these churches is just getting fixated on what they think has changed, but really, it's not changed at all. It's just a change in leadership.

Gavin believes that Rainer's (2020) perspective regarding change is aligned with God's. Instead of focusing on how to avoid change and decline, he said churches should focus on how to embrace change and thrive. Hayden noted that dying churches tend to resist change and prefer the status quo. They may be exclusive and uncomfortable with newcomers. Hayden believes it is important to engage with the changing culture and be willing to try new things. Refusing to change can lead to the death of a church. According to Hayden,

> We cannot do the same thing while the culture around us is constantly changing. We've got to figure out ways to engage that culture, not to become like them, but to engage them and see them step out and try something new, you know. If this doesn't work, why keep doing it over and over again? Let's do something new. Let's see if that works, and that, to me, that's why a lot of churches die. They refuse to do something new. They're so bound up in tradition. Yeah, we'd rather the church die than change our traditions, and that's sad with any church.

Payton believes a healthy church stays true to its belief system while embracing the evolving world. It is important to evaluate how a church is dealing with the changing world and whether it is modifying its values just to suit certain groups. She emphasized the significance of upholding the church's values rather than modifying them to satisfy specific individuals or communities.

   Adapting to Change. The participants believe that adapting to change is crucial to keep up with new generations and retain members. Attracting younger generations is key. According to Joanne, some older members may be resistant to change due to their deep-rooted traditions. She expressed her concern, saying, "A lot of times, older people, the people who have been in the churches for a long time, they are so steeped in their traditions that they don't want to change." She believes they may fear that changing the methods of communicating the gospel will dilute the core message. She added, "They're afraid you're going to leave out the basic message." Olivia suggested that people need to choose between tradition and change. She mentioned, "A phrase that comes to mind for me, I think, is 'What hill are you going to die on?' Are you going to die on the hill of tradition or are you going to change with the times?" Olivia applied this idea to church music, highlighting how preferences have shifted from hymns to contemporary music. She added, "I think that's like what a lot of us look at whenever it comes to the church. We go in with, well, we want our music to be a certain way." Olivia argued that adapting to changing times is crucial to keeping up with new generations and retaining congregational members. She said,

> So, when you really get down to it, like how music has changed over time, you can't expect everything to stay the same. Otherwise, you're losing members. You're losing a new generation of the congregation that's coming up, I mean because they've adapted to what's current and new whenever it comes to the church.

   Noah discussed the controversy that arose when "Amazing Grace" was first introduced as a hymn. The song's deviation from the traditional church singing style sparked a heated debate.

Noah emphasized that change can be good or bad, depending on the moderation with which it is introduced. He also acknowledged that different styles of worship can be valid. He said, "Even though Southern Baptist style churches isn't my thing, with, you know, Southern gospel, quartets, traditional hymns, no drums, you know, who am I to say that they're completely wrong in the way that they worship?" Noah believes it is important to attract younger generations to keep the church alive. Joanne, on the other hand, thinks one way to foster a welcoming atmosphere for younger generations is through contemporary music. However, she acknowledged that some older individuals may have reservations about it, fearing that certain lyrics or tunes may not be in line with biblical teachings. She said, "Contemporary music was a thing that the older people, in some respects, just shy away from because they were afraid that a lot of the music or lyrics were not biblical. They shied away from it."

Colby believes in regularly examining practices and motivations. As a church, Colby thinks it is crucial to stop and analyze what they are doing and not simply follow the latest trends. Despite his personal love for hymns, he acknowledged it is easy to get caught up in the idea that they represent the only true theology and deem modern Christian music less authentic. He gave a reminder that this viewpoint is flawed, as hymns themselves were once the new and modern form of music, and what is most important is the condition of our hearts. Colby believes we should be regularly examining why we do what we do, and whether it aligns with God's will. He noted that this is applicable to every church, and in particular, he finds the message of Revelation 2:1-7 to be loving and compassionate. Colby believes instead of simply telling us to stop what we are doing, it offers us the opportunity to use our free will and sound judgment, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to examine our direction and make sure we are on the right path. He finds this message of hope to be incredibly inspiring.

Olivia also believes in looking for changes to attract new congregants. She drew inspiration from Haggai 1:5 and emphasized the importance of considering what changes can be made to appeal to a wider audience. She said, "You have to look within a church and look within. What's going to draw new people? Like, what can we change in order to draw new people and draw maybe a different congregation in order for growth to happen." Noah said,

> Some of my thoughts on the scripture from Revelation 2 is that, you know, it's basically a warning that if you're unwilling to get out of your own ways to let God be the path for people versus you trying to control that path, then the light's going to be taken away from you instead of you having that, you know, that light that you're shining that you can help people within the church… If you're a pastor and God's given you this great talent to be a good speaker but you're unwilling to get past your own interpretation and be open and receptive to what God's saying, God will just take the church away. He will take that position away. He will take that spiritual feeling away.

As Olivia put it, "There has to be death in order to regrow. But at the same time, like you know, it doesn't have to come at some harsh circumstances."

Noah and Hayden emphasized the importance of adapting to change for a church to thrive. Noah expressed his view regarding church closures and how, in certain cases, it can benefit the community. He believes that if a church is fixated on tradition and unwilling to adapt to change, it may be best to close it down. Noah noted, "If there are other churches in the area that are successfully changing and allowing God to move without sticking to tradition, sometimes those other churches should be cut down." He said, "That can come across as harsh, but it's just the truth of it." Hayden agreed with Noah's sentiment and added, "If the church is not growing, it's dying. I've said that. God didn't put us here to survive. He put us here to thrive." He also echoed Rainer's (2020) belief that change is vital and said, "I think that's one of the big things we got to do is that thing he says, change or die. It is that."

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Categories for RQ1

Themes	Categories
Beliefs About Church Growth and Revitalization (RQ1)	
Shepherding a church community	Sound biblical teaching Focus on Jesus Avoid going through the motions Spiritual growth
Focus on outreach and community	The Great Commission Outreach ministry Next generation Focus on relationships Welcoming to everyone
Willingness to change	Inevitability of change Adapting to change

RQ2. Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Leadership

RQ2 asked: "What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of leadership in church growth and revitalization?" The themes that emerged from this research question include *Providing Guidelines for Spiritual Growth* and *Values of Ministry Leadership*.

Providing Guidelines for Spiritual Growth

Pray and Worship. The participants believe in the importance of prayer and worship for a church community. Gatherings for prayer and worship are essential for any church community, according to Gavin. He thinks a pastor should lead the congregation in coming together to pray to God in unison and engage in collective worship. He said, "Supernatural power in a church overcomes all worldly problems." Enthusiasm and positivity are crucial in spreading the message, according to Hayden. He emphasized the need to "preach the word and do it joyfully." He mentioned how it can be easy for a pastor to become overwhelmed by the challenges of their role, and if they are not careful, they may focus solely on negative aspects of their congregation or surroundings. He noted this can make it difficult for them to convey the joy of following Jesus

to their congregation. He suggested being mindful not to let negativity consume us to the point where we become critical of everything. Instead, we should be sharing the joy of our faith and rejoicing in what God is doing in our lives and communities. He mentioned reading Psalm 107 which says we must remember the wonderful things that God has done and continue to look for the ways in which He is working among us. He said, "We got to be expressing the joy of knowing the Lord. We got to be sharing what God is doing among us."

Colby believes the first step to address the issue of dying churches is to pray and realize that something is missing. Hayden shared that during their prayer meetings, the attendees reviewed the prayer requests from the past couple of weeks and gave updates on each person's situation. They were grateful for the improvements and praised God for his work. He emphasized the importance of giving God praise and reporting all the news, not just the negative. He encouraged people to avoid becoming complainers and to recognize the positive changes in their lives. He said, "If we're not careful, we quit praising God. We just become complainers."

Be Holy Spirit-Driven. Participants shared their insights on seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. According to Colby, it is important to acknowledge when we do not have all the answers and to seek guidance from God. He emphasized that it is not about "brute forcing" our way through problems or copying someone else's approach. Instead, we need to be open to where God is leading us and be willing to learn from others along the way. As Colby quoted from James, "Pray for wisdom. He will give it." Brody added that if you are driven by the Holy Spirit, what you may think is third in importance may end up being sixth or may not take place at all. He said that unlike in business, there is no set ladder for ministry.

Intentional in Discipleship. Participants had a strong appreciation for the importance of helping the people in their church grow and learn about God. According to Payton, pastors must

focus on the personal growth of their congregation. She emphasized the importance of leaders recognizing their influence and truly making a bigger impact on the people they are leading. Especially when working with youth, she believes it is crucial to go beyond mere friendship and focus on mentoring and pushing biblical knowledge at them. Mason, on the other hand, believes a pastor should have the ability to guide those individuals who are under their mentorship. He believes that as a pastor, you are not responsible for mentoring everyone, but rather specific individuals who will then lead others. He noted that this does not mean that you do not care for others, but instead that you are influencing those who hold influence.

Colby shared his experience with the church's limited support system. He said as a result, it became common for anyone willing to lend a hand to be welcomed, regardless of their level of expertise. However, Colby recognized that this posed an issue, as there was a lack of proper training for those who stepped up to lead various activities. For instance, he said if someone were to lead a Bible study, there should have been a training period to ensure they understood the expectations and goals of the study. Without adequate preparation, it felt as though band-aids were being used to cover up the issue. While it was admirable that people wanted to help, there seemed to be a disconnect between the desire to assist and the necessary preparation. As he put it, "Nobody ever taught me what it meant to be a worship leader. I was just that was thrown in there, you know."

Hayden suggested that pastors should focus on the good things God is doing and not just on the bad. He advised pastors to keep the staff, volunteers, and members looking for the good things too. He said they should celebrate every time someone comes to know the Lord and focus on the joy of it. He mentioned it is easy to pick apart all the little stuff, but one should learn to celebrate the one life that has changed. He said,

Somebody's not going to like everything. So, the thing is, we have to focus on the joy. We got to focus on what's working well, how the body's working in unison, how we're reaching the lost in the community. We have to learn to celebrate well. When we see that changing individual, we got to learn to celebrate that.

According to Brody, abstract concepts such as pride, greed, gossip, envy, and strife are, unfortunately, allowed to simmer and drive decisions within some churches. He believes true discipleship, as outlined in the Bible, is often overlooked due to a misconception that it requires cruelty or harshness. He said, "It is practically non-existent because people think you're too cruel, you're too hard, you're too harsh… you don't possess the fruits of the spirit, patience, love, humility. They think you're a know-it-all, blah blah blah." He said,

Gossipers and backbiters are allowed to stay in church. People talk about them in two pews over, "All she does is gossip." But they never say anything to her on the way out the door. The pastor never addresses them on the way out the door. So now you have two people living in sin. You got the one that's committing the sin and the one that's not addressing his brother. But the Bible says you'd rather have a millstone tied around your neck than to abandon one of my children.

Furthermore, Brody said pastors do not have conversations such as:

Hey, I know you've been lusting and talking about another woman, but you're a married man. Do you know how that's going to affect the church?... When you spoke to one of our brothers the other day, I noticed you were extremely angry in tone… You were gossiping about so and so. Have you confronted him personally like the Bible says? Have you been to him one-on-one as a brother? We never ask those kinds of questions to our Christian brothers.

Brody emphasized the importance of the Great Commission. He mentioned that if the congregation does not know about it, it is like "leaving off half of the gospel." Brody believes it is essential to have leaders who understand the truth of evangelism and "what its role is biblically in our culture." He emphasized the importance of going after the lost. He said, "If we don't start getting that… we won't have nowhere to send them to soon. We'll just be making orphans." Brody highlighted that if the church dies, the tragedy will be that people whom God saves and calls will not have a home. He believes leaders must take responsibility for their words and

actions, and ensure that they do not contribute to the destruction of the church. He said, "We as a generation will have made orphans because we've destroyed the church with our tongue, with our actions, with our lack of action."

Brody emphasized the importance of sanctification and having someone who holds a leader accountable. He said, "We will not hold ourselves accountable because our hearts are evil." He noted that Peter prayed for a change of heart so his mind could be transformed. Brody said,

> Peter has been in ministry for 40 years, and he's still saying, "God, please change my heart first so that my mind can be transformed." So, the heart is the issue. We have a bad heart, not a bad way of thinking. We have a bad heart, and it has to be renewed through the blood of Christ, the testimony, and the Word.

Brody stressed the importance of knowing your audience. He emphasized the need for pastors to help their congregations grow in their faith. Brody mentioned how Jesus was known to communicate differently with different people based on their level of understanding. For instance, he spoke to the Pharisees in a different manner than he did to the woman at the well, and he conversed with Mark, who was not an apostle, differently than he did with his apostles. Peter, too, received a unique style of communication as compared to the Sons of Thunder. Jesus recognized that every individual was on a different level of understanding, culturally and intellectually, and he adapted his communication style accordingly. Brody believes that by following this example, we can learn to be more effective communicators and have a greater impact on culture.

Focus on the Word. Participants believe pastors should stay rooted in the Word, deliver the truth, and be culturally and spiritually aware. As a pastor, it is crucial to remain deeply rooted in the Word, according to Hayden. He said, "It is, essentially to me, the pastor's responsibility in his calling to stay in the Word, to stay read up, focused, studied, you know." He cited how the

Apostle Paul reminds us to study and show ourselves approved to God, which means our learning never truly ends. He stressed that we cannot simply stop and feel content with what we know. He said, "A pastor that just stops and says, OK I got that, and I can preach the Word the rest of my life. No!" He said, "You gotta be read up culturally. We need to know where the culture is and what's going on in the culture, and we need to be read up spiritually." Hayden believes leaders must continually be culturally aware and spiritually in tune with the world around us, including events like those in Israel. He emphasized the importance of staying dedicated to studying and staying informed about what is happening in the world.

According to Payton, pastors ought to deliver "truth right out of the Bible." She expressed that there are those who present more like a comedy show and share only their personal perspective rather than biblical truth. Payton believes leaders must not be self-centered, and emphasized, "It's not about us." A bit of humor can be great, but when it goes on for too long, it can have a domino effect on those who look up to you for guidance. She noted, "That's the domino effect of standing in a position of influence is that that's going to trickle down into the people that are there to learn from you." She insisted that the message should not be diluted to fit modern times, and as a pastor, it is crucial to only speak the truth. According to Payton, "It shouldn't even be said if it's not the absolute truth, like Word of God. You shouldn't even be up there putting this message out to people. It's upsetting!" She said,

> I get that they want parishioners, that they need money to run churches, that they need a community within the church, fellowship, and all that stuff. But why does it have to be at the cost of absolute truth, which is what we all need as followers of Christ? Otherwise, it's just nonsense, you know.

Focus on Jesus. The participants believe leaders must prioritize focusing on Jesus and the joy of knowing him. According to Gavin, what matters most is a pastor's "active confidence in Jesus Christ." Hayden emphasized the need for leaders to encourage focusing on the joy of

knowing Jesus as our savior and Lord, instead of the negatives around us. He said, "Lord knows, the devil can put plenty of stuff in front of our face that's negative, but we have to focus on the joy of the Lord." He cited Hebrews 12, that we should cast off every weight of sin that so easily beset us, and run with endurance the race it set before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. By consciously focusing on the joy in the lives of those who love the Lord, Hayden believes we avoid getting critical and cynical.

Values of Ministry Leadership

Shepherding. The participants expressed a strong appreciation for the concept of shepherding in the context of pastoral work. Liam emphasized that pastors are shepherds of the flock and must tend to their sheep properly or face consequences. He highlighted the importance of a good pastor having a relationship with every member of the congregation, just like a shepherd knows and cares for each sheep. He also compared the relationship children have with their parents to the relationship they have with God. He shared that he would ask the kids at church to consider what their relationship with their parents would look like if they spent the same amount of time with them as they do with God. He emphasized the importance of focusing on children's ministry as it is the future of the Kingdom.

Joanne shared her views on a shepherd, stating that they are someone who cares deeply for their flock. She mentioned a minister who excelled in attending to the sick. He made it his mission to visit and care for any member of his church who was unwell, ensuring their wellbeing. Gavin believes people naturally look for guidance and direction and said, "People need to be led." For him, the principles of shepherding and servant leadership are self-evident. In Olivia's view, shepherding, servant leadership, and emotional intelligence are essential to the pastor's role. She thinks pastors are seen as shepherds, guiding people towards God and fulfilling

their divine calling. She agreed that pastors need to have a deep understanding of the emotions of others and be willing to serve and listen to their needs. Olivia acknowledged that pastoral work can be emotionally challenging. She said, "I'm sure that they have all heard the worst of the worst, yet they still choose to take on that position and continue with it." She believes these qualities align with the duties and responsibilities of a pastor.

Mason believes that a shepherd is responsible for caring for their flock. He said, "Shepherds just go and do, and they take over, and they care and nurture." He thinks they do not typically answer to another shepherd, as they consider their flock to be their own and hold deep affection for them. He thinks the shepherd does not simply herd the sheep around for the sake of it but instead out of genuine love and concern for their safety. Mason emphasized the importance of a shepherd keeping an eye out for any potential threats, as well as any vulnerable sheep who may wander into dangerous territory. He said, "They can get lost, so you're looking out for the bad guy but you're also looking for the little one that can get into the bad stuff on his own."

Payton believes it is important for the shepherd to pray and be in the vicinity. Similarly, Colby believes that a shepherd is dedicated and remains closely connected with their flock to guide and support them. He thinks the shepherd does not tend to their sheep remotely or attend to a different flock altogether. Colby notes that in the pursuit of church growth, it seems that the personal touch of one-to-one shepherding may be overlooked, leaving the people feeling less cared for. Brody also believes that pastors must always prioritize the needs of the sheep first. He thinks that pastors should recognize this and even be willing to let them go to another church where they can thrive better. Brody believes that leaders must prioritize the sheep and their maturity over how many people attend church.

Serving Sacrificially. The participants stressed the importance of having a servant's heart in leadership, as exemplified by Jesus. They believe that effective leaders prioritize the well-being of their followers and lead by example while building relationships with the congregation. According to Gavin, true leaders possess a servant's heart, putting the needs of others first. He believes that Jesus himself teaches this concept in the gospel. Liam stressed the importance of having a pastor who is here to serve and not be served. For him, a good pastor should have a servant's heart and come to do the Lord's work with an open heart and no expectations. Liam emphasized the need for pastors to love people and cherish sitting down with people, regardless of their background. He also highlighted the importance of building relationships, not just pushing people out. Liam cited two examples of great pastors who serve their community with love and incorporate the Lord in everything they do. They put others first and have a humble heart, which makes them good pastors.

The participants emphasized the importance of service and empowering others. Colby believes that the most effective mentors and spiritual leaders are those who lead by example and prioritize service. He referenced the teachings of Jesus and said,

> It's like Christ, where you wash the disciples' feet, or the verse that says, you know, those who are last will be first. When leaders have that in the correct order, it speaks so much to the people around them. Like, you want to be part of that. You're drawn to that.

On the other hand, he cautioned that leaders who expect to be served without serving others risk coming across as arrogant, which goes against our higher calling. Colby believes it is essential to understand that ministry is not a business, and in order to lead effectively, one must learn the importance of serving. For him, the most effective leaders are those who remember that they still serve and are at the feet of Christ.

Mason believes that servant leadership involves sacrificing something that may rightfully be yours, and instead offering it to someone else. He thinks that it is about empowering others to do your job so that, eventually, you will not have to do it yourself. He said, "Train people to do your job so you don't have to do it. Work yourself out of a job. That's servant leadership in my opinion." He feels this approach is quite different from the common mindset of striving to obtain a position and then remaining there indefinitely, which can be a major challenge for many senior pastors. Mason said, "Most people try to work themselves into a job and then they stay there. That's the one thing, the chink in the armor for a lot of senior pastors." He believes true servant leadership involves being someone who cares for others and nurtures them.

Noah thinks that certain pastors, regardless of age or experience, can become overly focused on themselves and their perceived abilities to share God's message. They may even go so far as to demand that their congregation adhere to their specific teachings. He believes that these pastors are a little bit self-centered and get fixated on "God has gifted me to share this Word with you, so you need to follow my ways." Olivia agreed that if you are selfish, "you can't really envision anybody else's view or envision God's for that matter." She thinks that service is paramount and said, "Service has always been the big deal to me." Liam expressed the importance of a pastor not only preaching the word of God but also spending quality time with the congregation and building relationships with them. He compared this to Jesus, who spent time with his disciples and served them, setting an example for us to follow. Liam emphasized the need for servant hearts and loving others as Jesus would want us to do. He believes we should treat others well inside and outside the church, surrender control to the Lord, and follow wherever He leads.

Mason believes that the principle of iron sharpening iron is particularly relevant to teams of pastors. He holds the view that pastors should not be simply pastors in name only. He said, "They don't become pastors because I want to be pastor and sit in the office, and talk on the phone, and drink coffee, you know, and then come out and speak to the crowd." Instead, they are proactive and strive to accomplish tasks, no matter how small. He compared this to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Similarly, Brody subscribes to the idea of turning the triangle upside down where the leader is at the bottom while all the volunteers and congregants are more important than the ministry. He feels this is an important perspective to consider, particularly since Western culture has taught the opposite. Likewise, Joanne understands the importance of being a servant leader. She expressed some hesitation when stating, "To be a good Christian, to be a Christian who shows other people they are Christian, I think you have to be a servant leader." She emphasized that this involves starting as a servant and working one's way up to become a leader, rather than striving to immediately take on a leadership role. She said, "I think a lot of times, we want to start at the top." She believes we all have a responsibility to serve in some capacity, starting from the bottom and gradually ascending to more prominent roles.

Empathy and Emotional Intelligence. The participants recognized the significance of empathy and emotional intelligence in fostering the growth and well-being of a church community. Noah, in particular, places great emphasis on the value of empathy. According to his perspective, it is imperative to be flexible and approach interactions with others in a compassionate manner, rather than rigidly adhering to strict rules. He clarified this by saying,

> If you've got an old school Southern Baptist preacher that's fixated on black and white versus having empathy to work with people and being adaptable, and not adaptable to the Word, but adaptable to people, where it's not just "Hey this is what my church" … that's the big word is when you get "my church." You hear a lot of people say, "My church believes this, my church believes that" and then there are two Baptist churches across the

street from each other because they don't agree on the interpretation of the Word on one little thing, you know.

He compared the relationship between a doctor and a patient, where a good doctor should have empathy for their patient and work to build a relationship with them, rather than just prescribing pills and moving on to the next person. Similarly, he thinks building a relationship with Christ is a personal journey, and it is important to share that journey with others in a compassionate and understanding way.

The other participants emphasized that church leaders who value emotional intelligence can have a profound impact on the well-being of their congregation. Colby shared that there is a lack of emotional intelligence in his church and that "only very few go to that emotional place where it's like, 'Hey, let's dive deeper.'" Joanne has observed that many church members struggle to mature emotionally, hindering their spiritual growth. Mason also stressed the importance of emotional intelligence and how it relates to social situations. He highlighted the need to read a situation and know how far to go or not to go, rather than being overly exuberant or glum. He believes that having good emotional intelligence enables one to witness and share their joy appropriately, without being insensitive to others. He said, "If they asked me why I'm so happy, then it gives me a chance to witness." Lastly, Gavin believes that emotional intelligence is helpful in reviving the modern-day church. He thinks that by being attuned to the emotions of others, misunderstandings and miscommunications can be avoided. He believes emotional intelligence plays a role in preserving the unity and well-being of church families.

Show Love and Kindness. The participants believe that pastors must demonstrate love and cultivate kindness. According to Joanne, pastors should value outreach and prioritize demonstrating love to people. This includes those who visit the church, as well as those who have yet to walk through the doors. She shared that the most effective pastors she has worked

with are outgoing individuals who genuinely enjoy engaging with others. Some have even served as firefighters or coached community sports teams. By doing so, they are able to establish connections beyond the church walls. Additionally, they often organized events like neighborhood visits, block parties, and pool parties to invite new faces and share the message of Jesus' love. These efforts have proven successful in welcoming newcomers and fostering a sense of community.

Gavin believes that building camaraderie is important for fellowship, and fun activities such as cookouts, concerts, games, and sports can help promote a sense of belonging among church members. He emphasized the importance of seeking joy in the church, for there is joy in the Lord, and it is magnetic. In his opinion, a balance of reverence and playfulness makes for an excellent combination of pastoral qualities. Gavin values leaders who possess qualities such as confidence, knowledge, sense of humor, playfulness, faithfulness, and consistency. He finds mentorship from someone who possesses confidence, knowledge, and faith particularly valuable.

Humility. The importance of humility was a shared belief among the participants. Payton values humility and recognizes that one's perspective could be wrong based on one's experiences. She acknowledges that being in a position of influence means constantly reflecting on your actions and words. Liam believes that we should recognize where we have failed and make it right by reconciling with others because relationships are important. He said, "It is about our relationship with the Lord and with each other." Brody draws inspiration from Paul's humility and where Paul considered himself after decades in ministry:

> Even Paul, when he was talking about where he fits in the scheme of things… He was talking about himself as an oarsman, a guy who rode a boat where there were three levels. There was the top tier that had sun. It was a lot of fresh air. Your paddles weren't as deep in the water. They were the finishing touch and, you know, the speed. Then you had your second level of rowers. They were in essence, the turbo power. Then you had your bottom level who was doing the steering and the hard work of moving the ship, and Paul

considered himself even on that lower level of understanding when he was 40 or 50 years in the ministry. We don't have people like that no more. They all think they're the captain on the top deck. If they ain't, they want to be.

Similarly, Colby stressed the importance of humility and self-reflection as key attributes for leaders. He advised that leaders need to consider their ways and ask the tough questions. He suggested bringing together the church's leadership and having an open and honest discussion about what is working, what is not, and what could be improved. He proposed visiting other churches as a team to connect with their leadership, learn from them, and see what aspects of their approach might be worth emulating. Colby believes that humility and prayer are key. He referenced the Bible, saying "If my people would humble themselves and pray," and contended that "those two things lead to wonderful things."

Authentic. Participants stressed the importance of authenticity in leadership. Mason believes leaders must embody authenticity by following through with their words. He asked, "Do you practice what you preach and model it?" He thinks it is essential to avoid presenting oneself as someone they are not and refrain from fabricating information when uncertain. He cautioned, "Don't try to pretend to be something you're not, but also, if you don't know an answer, don't make something up." Payton observed that the revivals that she has seen "almost seem fake". She made the comparison to "going to church just on Christmas or Easter, only this time, you're going to attend because it's an event." She said there needs to be repentance, "It's about you and your relationship and your walk."

Empower and Equip Others. The participants expressed a strong desire to empower and equip others, citing delegation and knowledge transfer as key priorities. Brody emphasized the responsibility of ministry leaders to ensure the sustainability of their ministry and ensure that the "ministry does not kill the ministry." To achieve this, he suggested that leaders must be

financially vetted and prepared and have volunteer training processes, training tools, and equipment to empower people. On the other hand, Mason suggested that ministry leaders should delegate responsibilities so that they can focus on building relationships within their community. With so many other commitments, he said it becomes clear that someone must take on the responsibility of caring for the facilities. He mentioned perhaps someone else is better suited for the task and can do a more efficient job. Mason believes it is important for pastors to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and surround themselves with individuals who can complement their skills. He noted this may mean bringing on other pastors who can offer new perspectives or mentoring individuals who have the potential to grow. Colby highlighted the issue of churches being unwilling to cross-share, with pastors and leadership being hesitant to share their knowledge due to jealousy and fear of losing members. He believes that this fear is unfounded and counterproductive, as the goal is for people to grow.

Table 2: Emergent Themes and Categories for RQ2

Themes	Categories
Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Leadership (RQ2)	
Providing guidelines for spiritual growth	Pray and worship Be Holy Spirit-driven Intentional discipleship Focus on the Word Focus on Jesus
Values of ministry leadership	Shepherding Serving sacrificially Empathy and emotional intelligence Show love and kindness Humility Authentic Empower and equip others

RQ3. Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Digital Technologies

RQ3 asked: "What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role, if any, of digital technology in church

growth and revitalization?" The themes that emerged from this research question include

Benefits of Technology and *Negative Effects of Technology*.

Benefits of Technology

Communication and Relationship Building. The participants emphasized the

significance of leveraging technology to expand the reach of churches. Their priorities entailed

utilizing social media platforms, live streaming, and large video displays to engage with

congregants. Liam believes that churches should take advantage of technology to reach more

people who cannot attend church in person. He said, "I would update every church because the

way is digital. I mean, we reach more people online than we do in person. We can put an event

out there. We can boost it and reach 10,000 people." Liam thinks that communication is key and

that technology facilitates good communication, which leads to good relationships. He said,

> We could have good relationships and we could have bad relationships. Good
> relationships are accomplished through good communication. Bad relationships are
> covered through bad communication and so when we have good communication, even if
> the person does not attend this church, we might still have a good relationship with them.

Noah was convinced that one of the most effective ways to reach people is through social

media. He noted that almost everyone is on some form of social media, except for perhaps very

traditional or older congregations. According to him, live broadcasts are especially powerful

because they allow people to feel connected to the church even if they cannot physically attend.

He emphasized the importance of sharing the message of the church in any way possible. For

instance, Noah suggested using short reels and conducting interviews with the pastor are great

ways to spread the message beyond the four walls of the church. He even recommended inviting

the congregation to submit questions to answer during these interviews.

The participants believe that effective communication, an inclusive tone, and the strategic

use of technology are key components in achieving church objectives. Olivia believes that live

feeds and big video screens are seen as great ways to connect with people. When it comes to reaching one's target audience through social media, she stressed the importance of not coming across as condescending. She noted that one must consider what they are posting and how it might be received by others. She said, "I've seen giant billboards in like Virginia or somewhere and maybe South Carolina that are like, it's almost like they're scaring people into being saved, so that's what I think as far as social media goes." She recommended that if a church has a social media team, make sure everyone is on the same page and working towards the same goals. She mentioned engaging with the audience by asking them what they need from the church. Olivia believes this can lead to growth and revitalization.

Hayden said, "We're kind of unique here in that we are a military community. We have quite a bit of folks coming in, new folks coming in this area." He mentioned that their web page is instrumental in helping them reach out to new members of their community. Several individuals have already been following their church services online before attending in person, according to Hayden. He shared that several people told him, "I already watched you three or four Sundays before I walked in the door." He noted that this is where the internet and computer technology come in to support them.

Mason regards technology as a God-given gift and believes it is important to use it to glorify Him. He shared that the leadership team of another church came to visit to learn how his church was successfully implementing its vision of using technology. He believes it is crucial to have confidence in your vision, even if others may appear more intelligent. He said if God has given you a vision, trust in Him, and do not sell yourself short. Mason encourages the use of technology to advance your church's goals.

Opportunities to Connect and Serve. The participants recognized the importance of utilizing technology in order to effectively connect with others and serve the community. Mason acknowledged the value of live streaming during church services. He believes that embracing technology is crucial for effectively reaching people in today's digital age. He thinks not utilizing online streaming, social media, or other digital platforms means missing out on valuable opportunities to connect with others. Instead of lamenting the state of the world, Mason emphasized how it is important to make use of available technology to effect positive change. He said, "You can't sit here and say the world's going to hell in a handbasket. Well, you're letting it. If you have the technology and you're not utilizing it… you're part of the reason why." Mason also pointed out that in the past, it was normal to turn off phones during services, but today, using your phone to access Scripture through an app is a wonderful thing. However, he cautioned that the key is to use technology in a responsible and effective manner.

Brody shared how his ministry has developed a real-time communication app that connects believers with people in need of assistance. The app is designed to operate at the national level but remains community by using zip codes. He said this approach ensures that individuals remain invested in their community rather than solely relying on their platform. He cautioned that it is essential to remember that the tool is not a replacement for genuine relationships driven by the Holy Spirit. The goal is to help individuals transition away from the app after a few connections and establish themselves within the community because it is intended to facilitate connections rather than long-term relationships. He said, "It's a connection tool and not a relationship tool. I don't think most people have come to an understanding fully of that yet."

Joanne believes there is a wealth of technology available to us that can greatly benefit growing churches and encourage involvement from members. Gavin thinks that many individuals possess the skills to effectively manage and enhance church resources through technology, including sound reinforcement, website maintenance, video streaming, social media, and video presentations during services. He said, "The technology in this age is endless and extremely accessible." With the vast array of accessible technology available today, Gavin thinks there is great potential for these individuals to significantly impact their church communities. He believes their expertise and dedication could prove invaluable to the growth and success of their church.

COVID-19 Response. Participants adjusted their church services in response to the 2020 global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which shut down the world. Olivia recognized the value of leveraging technology to expand the reach of church services to reach more people who are unable or afraid to attend in person. She said, "We saw it like super clear with COVID and what that really does for people… You're essentially meeting them where they are." Hayden shared his experience of adapting to the pandemic, noting that his church used to have a website that was neglected and not very user-friendly. Though he occasionally made updates, it was not a major focus for them. When COVID hit, they had to adapt quickly. They decided to try broadcasting their Sunday services online and started by streaming from his front porch on a Facebook page he created. Hayden noted that it was a success, and they have continued to use that page to stream their services each week. While they keep their website updated for those who prefer to watch the service later, Facebook has become their primary platform for live streaming and engagement.

Enhancing Worship. The participants agreed that using technology can improve worship and attract younger people. Good sound quality and a welcoming environment are important. Joanne emphasized the value of technology in terms of sound and production quality. Similarly, Gavin echoed that technology could improve worship settings. Olivia said do not forget about the capabilities of the soundboard at church. She believes it is one of many tools for connecting with their congregation and spreading the message effectively. Liam indicated that the worship time and music in his church lack technology. He believes that adding instruments like drums and keyboards, along with technology, can attract younger audiences and meet their needs. Otherwise, he said, "We're not reaching the younger people. We're just still meeting those needs and wants of the older congregation."

Mason suggested that less traditional churches may be more attractive to some people. He shared how he has heard many complaints about dark churches where the lights are off. He mentioned that some people may feel more comfortable in a dimly lit church, as it offers them a sense of anonymity. He said it is important to remember that not everyone who enters a church is a seasoned Christian. Some are simply curious, like window shoppers, trying to decide if this is the right path for them. Mason believes that walking into a church that looks and smells like a traditional church, complete with pews, while being greeted by a bunch of people pointing and staring can be quite uncomfortable for these individuals. He said it is much easier to slip in unnoticed and sit in the back, especially if you are not the type who enjoys being the center of attention. He said this is why many people are drawn to darker, less traditional churches where they can blend in more easily. He said, "Sometimes, you know, that anonymous thing is actually better."

Simplifying Tasks. The participants believe in using technology to simplify tasks, access information, and improve communication. Gavin believes utilizing technology can streamline processes. He said, "If it makes things easier, simply use it." Liam shared a positive experience of upgrading to iPads for children signing in at their church. He said, "That has been such a blessing because it was a struggle checking the numbers and comparing everything." Hayden reported that their nursery, children's workers, and youth workers all use Planning Center to great effect, and they have discovered that they can do even more through their web page.

Mason described how phone apps provide him with the ability to read Scripture in various languages and quickly access information when needed. He noted that physical books may take some time to navigate, whereas with his phone, he can easily find what he needs. He said he has become familiar with its layout and has personalized it with his own markings. Mason believes technology is helpful in providing quick and convenient access to the information he needs.

Lastly, Hayden mentioned utilizing One Call Now to reach out to all members and active attendees of the church to remind them of upcoming events. He shared that this has been helpful, as many people tend to forget events even after reading about them in the bulletin. He added that by sending out reminders the day before or the day of the event, they have seen a significant increase in attendance. Several individuals have expressed gratitude for the reminder. He said, "There's a lot of different ways to use that technology, and we got to use it for the Lord's work. It's a big help, you know."

Negative Effects of Technology

Digital Literacy. The participants considered digital literacy, specifically regarding the use of technology in the church. Participants stressed the importance of inclusivity. For instance,

Hayden mentioned that their nursery and youth ministry rely on Planning Center, a technology-based software. However, he noted that they understand that their senior adult community may struggle with the platform, so they also provide paper schedules for those who are not computer-savvy. He believes it is important to include everyone and ensure that no one feels left out. He added, "We don't want them to just feel like, oh they don't want me anymore because I can't figure out how to use this." For those who are interested in learning more about technology, Hayden noted that they have a volunteer who can provide one-on-one training to anyone who needs it.

Joanne cautioned that we must be mindful of the potential drawbacks that arise when we rely solely on technology. She emphasized that it is important to remember that not everyone is tech-savvy, and we do not want to exclude anyone from participating in church activities. She said, "One of the hazards right now is that when you want to put everything in an app or you have to go look on your computer to find out what's going on, that's when you leave a whole level of folks out." According to her, we need to find a balance between utilizing technology and making sure everyone is included. She said,

> I cringed yesterday when a pastor was talking about how you got to get the app or you won't know anything that's going on, you know, because I have the app and everything, but I'm not going to stop and look at it every day. And there are a lot of people, I'd say from the age of 60 up, who may or may not even mess with any technology except their phone, and they may not want an app on their phone that does that.

Joanne shared another personal experience from her previous workplace, where the college she worked for transitioned to an online format. She noticed that many of the high school students lacked access to the Internet at home. She noted that they served a low-income area, so computer access was not always possible for these students. Despite the college's assumption that all students have access, her experience working with these kids told her otherwise. Their

community did not have the same level of affluence as others assumed, and resources were limited. She said, "People get left out because the people who are so hooked on technology forget there's another world out there that isn't hooked on technology. That's the big thing." Joanne believes that a similar phenomenon is occurring at her church, and she cautioned one of the pastors, "You've got to be careful because you're going to leave out a bunch of people unless you're intentional about leaving those people out."

Distraction from Spiritual Maturity. Participants believe that technology can be a distraction from spiritual growth and can have negative consequences when used excessively. Brody said the enemy designed the impact of technology to be exactly as it is. He mentioned how Jesus assigned the enemy 25 different names, including the Snatcher of Word. He believes the enemy promotes a culture of deafness and blindness, causing people to rely on visual technology to hear and make decisions based on their feelings rather than the truth. He thinks this has allowed the enemy to gain more ground using technology, as it operates in a digital realm without a Spirit-led relationship.

Brody also believes some Christians believe that attending church is no longer necessary as they can simply watch it online, which is a deviation from the teachings of the faith. He said,

> So, churches that use live streams and all these other media, as much as our information technology has advanced, Christianity has declined at the same time. The fact is that it has not helped build or mature the body. It's helped us connect. But to bring depth and more people going to church and more people coming to Christ in Western culture, statistics show that information technology has increased a hundredfold… but Christianity in the United States has decreased at the same time that technology has exponentially increased by a hundredfold. So, it's not my opinion. There are facts that show that it hasn't made no difference.

He further added, "We had a greater revival when it was people traveling around on the horse and word of mouth because they built what? Relationship, not connections." Brody prioritizes relationships over mere connections facilitated by technology. He said his ministry team

recognizes its limitations in spreading the gospel and changing culture. Moreover, Brody thinks some people have become so engrossed in technology that they tune out the world around them. He said it is important to recognize these self-centered tendencies and focus instead on others and the world around us.

Colby shared how the church he attends relies heavily on technology, with in-ear monitors, AV and live streaming teams, a music director, and dozens of volunteers. He worries that our focus on these tools may distract from our true purpose. He said God does not need all of this technology, and he wonders if we are simply adding it because we can, without considering whether it truly enhances our experience. In his opinion, the biggest harm is that it detracts from our goal of growing spiritually. Colby also shared how he has previously led worship using solely his guitar but was asked by the church to incorporate additional tracks, despite the fact that it was intended to be an intimate setting. He said the worship was meant for a small group of leaders, and the request to add more elements did not align with the intended atmosphere. It became clear to him that the concern was not about context, but rather how it was perceived. This realization was disconcerting to Colby. He said, "They can't get past now going back to a simpler version of something."

Colby mentioned how the impact of television on our society has been discussed for many years. He said some argue that it is inherently good or evil, but in reality, it is what we make of it. Similarly, he said other technologies like the Internet are neither good nor bad on their own but can be addictive and have negative consequences when used excessively. Colby believes that technology can be a "net negative" for society, including the Internet, due to the addictions and distractions it creates. He said, "I think technology as a whole is a net negative for

sure, without a doubt." He said it is important to consider the impact of our technology use and strive for balance in our lives.

Colby believes there are some practical benefits to the use of organizational software in large churches. For example, he said it makes the task of organizing teams much easier than it would have been in the past. However, while these technological advancements are helpful, he believes that their benefits do not outweigh the potential drawbacks. He mentioned that we have certainly come a long way in terms of technology, but he is not sure that it has had a significant impact on our spiritual growth. Colby said this is not a matter of being "old school" or resistant to change, as he personally enjoys and appreciates new technologies. However, he has yet to see evidence that these advancements have led to a deeper connection with the Word or a greater level of spiritual growth among congregations. In describing his church, he said, "If you're telling me, 'Wow, this church has all the AV stuff. It's all great and their congregation is like, wow, they are on fire. They are so deep in the Word.' They're not. That's the reality." He believes that while technology may seem like a way to enhance our experiences, it should not come at the cost of spiritual depth. He said,

> A lot of the dying churches, unfortunately, they will go and copy… "What we need is better-sounding worship or what we need is more fancy graphics," but that's not the answer. That's the sad part. They go after the wrong answer because I feel like they're not willing to ask God, "What are we missing?"

According to Colby, one thing we may be overlooking is seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit and asking God to humble our congregation. He believes leaders should ask what it is that their church truly needs to grow. He said it is not flashy graphics or an expensive software system. He thinks that these material things will not provide the solution and they may even have a negative impact because we can get caught up in the excitement of new technology without making any real changes. Colby compared our relationship with God to buying new exercise

equipment, which does not do anything if we do not use it consistently. He thinks we need to spend time with God, humble ourselves, and seek His guidance. While technology is tempting, he said we must also recognize its potential dangers. He loves technology, but he understands the need to approach it with caution.

Church Technology Mistakes. The participants stressed the importance of effective technology use in churches. According to Joanne, it is crucial that those in leadership roles have a good grasp of technology and how to use it effectively to enhance the service. She mentioned that if not used properly, technology can detract from the worship experience. She said, "Technology can quench the Spirit when it is not working right… the technology can just tear up a service." Olivia mentioned, "There's the saying that technology is great until it doesn't work." While there are concerns about relying too much on technology, she believes the use of it to reach more people is viewed as progress and a positive development. She said, "Are we reaching more people in a way that we never had the ability to? Absolutely. We're using it to our advantage instead of just not using it at all." Olivia cautioned that technology should be used wisely to avoid any mistakes that could damage one's credibility. She said, "You have to be technologically savvy. Don't make a minor mix-up of whose account you're on and things like that. That's a big no-no."

Hayden has not observed any harm caused by technology, but he has heard concerns over outdated websites. He said,

> Now, I have heard people say, "Well, I looked at such and such church's website. It has not been updated in two years, and I'm figuring if they don't care to keep their website up, then maybe they don't care enough about, you know." I've heard that.

According to Hayden, this is the only negative feedback he has heard, so "If you're going to have it, you better keep it up to date. You better keep it up to date."

Colby spends all day in the digital world, working on his laptop and despite his immersion in technology, he said sometimes he questions its usefulness. He said, "I am in the junk of technology along with everybody and I'm going to sound like such a curmudgeon because I feel like it's not useful." Similarly, Brody shared how he has a deep appreciation for technology and all its benefits. However, he mentioned it is important to recognize that technology is not a complete solution in and of itself. He said it is simply a tool and we cannot rely on it as the ultimate answer to our problems. He believes if we are not careful, it can even be a liability and provide more opportunities for the enemy. He added that as Holy Spirit-driven individuals, we must approach technology with discernment and caution.

Table 3: Emergent Themes and Categories for RQ3

Themes	Categories
Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Digital Technology (RQ3)	
Benefits of technology	Communication and relationship-building Opportunities to connect and serve COVID-19 response Enhancing worship Simplifying tasks
Negative effects of technology	Digital literacy Distraction from spiritual maturity Church technology mistakes

RQ4. Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding the Holy Spirit

RQ4 asked: "What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in church growth and revitalization?" The themes that emerged from this research question include *Guidance and Direction of the Holy Spirit* and *Spiritual Maturity*.

Guidance and Direction of the Holy Spirit

Guidance of the Holy Spirit. The participants highlighted the crucial role of church leadership that is guided by the Holy Spirit. Gavin affirmed that the Holy Spirit guides us

towards all truth. He believes that seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, coupled with the

wisdom of a team of leaders, is essential in revitalizing a church. Similarly, Brody underscored

the importance of individuals, leaders, and volunteers who are motivated by the Holy Spirit. He

stressed the value of prioritizing people and relationships in ministry, with spiritual maturity

taking precedence over organizational structure. Gavin also expressed his belief in following

Jesus in every aspect of church leadership.

Hayden shared that asking the Holy Spirit for guidance is crucial in achieving success.

He said,

> I've tried always to go to prayer. Anytime I try to do something on my own, I'm going to run up against a brick wall. If the Holy Spirit is leading, the Holy Spirit will open those doors. He will give us that direction. I learned that early on in the ministry. He will provide. Always pray, Lord if it's your will, open the door wide open. If it's not, close it. Close it tight. I've seen that happen on many occasions. I've seen him close the door, shut it tight. I've seen him throw the door wide open. So, I always encourage people, let's pray. Let's ask the Holy Spirit for guidance.

Brody asserted that when volunteers are guided by the Holy Spirit, their work becomes

meaningful. He urges believers to be attentive to the Holy Spirit's movements. He cautioned that

many churchgoers do not truly listen, despite spending significant time in prayer. He emphasized

that to be effectively guided, one must learn to listen as well as pray. He said,

> A lot of people in church don't even listen to the Holy Spirit. They do a lot of praying but very little listening. If you don't understand how to listen as much as you know how to pray, then you're not going to be guided very much. You're going to depend on it to happen by God snapping his fingers and answering your command.

Participants shared personal stories and reflections on how the Holy Spirit guided them in

advancing the Kingdom. Noah believes that we often become fixated in our own ways,

sometimes to the point of selfishness. He shared a personal story of how he stayed at church for

over a year, despite feeling unhappy and disconnected from his spiritual journey. Looking back,

he mentioned realizing that he was not listening to the Holy Spirit and instead, was trying to

please others and remain in his comfort zone. He noted how this is a pattern he noticed in himself and even in others who become closed off to change because they are stuck in tradition. He said it can be difficult to break free from this mindset and truly listen to what the Spirit is guiding us towards. Liam believes God has called him to serve in a higher biblical ministry. He has shared this with his pastor and deacons, but unfortunately, nothing has been done yet. He trusts that God is in control and will give discernment and change hearts. He expressed that he felt overwhelmed by the emotional nature of the Holy Spirit's calling, which is leading him to a path across the country.

Hayden shared that throughout this year, his church experienced some changes in their staff. As a leader, he always encouraged his team to seek guidance through prayer and the Holy Spirit. He mentioned that they review multiple candidates for a position, and then individually, they take time to pray and write down their top choices. When they reconvene, if the Holy Spirit confirms their decision, they move forward with confidence. He said, "At home, while we're in prayer, we write down one, two, or three. When we come in, if the Holy Spirit is in on that thing, your one ought to be your one all the way." He said it is a blessing to see their team seeking the Spirit's guidance in this way. Just as the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from traveling to certain areas, he believes that the Spirit can also lead us to avoid certain paths. He said, "If the Holy Spirit doesn't want us to do something, we believe the Holy Spirit can give us enough to stop. No, we don't need to go there. We don't need to do that."

Hayden also shared that a few years back, the church had plans for a tent revival with a particular speaker in mind. Unfortunately, the speaker had a conflict and could not make it, so they decided not to go forward with it. Fast forward to this year, and they still had a desire for a tent revival, so he reached out to the same man again. This time, he was available and eager to

participate. Hayden felt like the Holy Spirit was guiding their steps, "Holy Spirit was in it. He blocked it one year. He had it one year. So, we just look at that… we don't see those things as something we're supposed to push against." He said they trust in God's timing and guidance, and if the Holy Spirit tells them, it is not the right time or direction, they listen and adjust accordingly. Likewise, Mason mentioned that sometimes he gets ahead of God and how that is not good. Hayden shared that he has learned from past mistakes of pushing ahead on his own instead of relying solely on God's wisdom and guidance. He said,

> If the Holy Spirit is like, "No, it's not the time. It's not right," don't push against that. We'll back up as Paul did. We'll say no. We'll go to another place. We'll go another way. We'll do something else.

Lastly, participants shared insights on spiritual growth. Mason conveyed how his actions are guided by the Holy Spirit. He acknowledged that the focus is not on him using his own abilities to achieve something, but rather on the Spirit's desire to reach out and expand the Kingdom. He believes the Holy Spirit is necessary for spiritual growth. He said, "The dwelling of the Holy Spirit is who primarily leads you and guides you to do what you're doing." Payton observed many examples of the fruits of the Spirit amongst church members, from the way they conduct themselves to their positive influence on their children and those around them. She noted that their actions are guided by biblical principles, and "it's very inspiring." She said it is amazing to see how much they have transformed since coming to Christ, shifting their focus from themselves to serving God in all that they do. According to Gavin, we demonstrate spiritual maturity by joyfully celebrating Jesus in our conversations. He believes individuals can use their talents and interests to bring glory to God within the church. As a worship leader, he finds inspiration in musicians who play music with enthusiasm and a spirit of joy for God.

Relying on the Holy Spirit. Joanne believes that without the Holy Spirit, one has nothing. In her opinion, churches can perform all the necessary rituals such as music and sermons, but unless the Holy Spirit is present, it will not impact people. Joanne feels that the Holy Spirit is an essential component of any church and is crucial for its growth. Olivia shared that she has always relied on the Holy Spirit, and cannot recall a time when she did not. She mentioned that sometimes fear holds us back from taking risks, but when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, the Holy Spirit sustains us and catches us when we fall. She believes it is common to feel hesitant about change, especially when we are accustomed to our routines. She said, "I think that when people are stuck in what they're used to, they're afraid to leave. They're afraid to change. They're afraid to go. I mean, because, what happens if you're wrong? That's understandable." But if we are being called to make a change, she believes there is likely a good reason for it, "If you're being told to do that, then there's a reason you're being told to do that." She believes as creatures of comfort, we tend to gravitate towards what is familiar and easy. But in reality, she said change is rarely easy, and it is important to remember that taking the smoother path may not always be the best choice for growth.

Noah mentioned how he has struggled with self-doubt in various aspects of his life, including his career and passion for music. For a while, he believed that pursuing a career in music was unrealistic due to his age and lack of experience. However, he said after praying about it, he was presented with an opportunity to play professionally. In addition to playing with the band, he mentioned that he also plays his instrument for worship. He shared that after a negative experience at one church, he thought it would take a long time to find another opportunity to play. However, with patience and persistence, he was able to connect with another church and

they have been using his skills ever since. He said, "God opened up that door." He further added,

"There's a million other examples I could probably think of."

Hayden said it is important not to rely solely on our own abilities, "If we try to do this

thing on our own, we're going to fall flat on our face." According to Hayden,

> The Holy Spirit is active in the lives of the members, and the Holy Spirit is the moving force. In other words, if we're praying, the Holy Spirit is hearing and moving, and if we try to do stuff on our own initiative, we're going to fail. If we're not taking it to the Lord in prayer, we're not looking for the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Brody strongly believes that the development of relationships with both believers and

non-believers is an integral part of the Holy Spirit's guidance and intrinsic motivation. He said

this is essential to the growth and expansion of the body, and it lies at the very heart of what the

New Testament Scriptures teach. Without relying on the Holy Spirit, all other aspects we may

focus on are essentially irrelevant.

Holy Spirit as Source of Strength. Colby described a difficult time in his life when he

called off his engagement and went through a dark period of anger. However, his pastor's words

about God saving him from one of the biggest mistakes of his life helped him change his

perspective and rely on God. He said,

> It didn't erase the hurt and the pain that I was feeling but it was probably the first time where I had no desire within me emotionally to be like, I'm going to go serve with the fervor and the love… I'm a pretty positive person so I always equated because I'm a Christian, I'm a happy person, until something really hard happened.

Colby asked the Holy Spirit for help and instead of straying away from God, he spent time with

Him and relied on Him completely. Colby shared how he felt peace and joy even in the darkest

times, and this reliance on the Holy Spirit helped him overcome emotional struggles. Prior to

experiencing significant loss, Colby said he always thought his life was going pretty well, and he

attributed it to his own abilities and strengths. It was only after facing hardships that he

recognized his own vulnerability and fragility. He mentioned, "Just like the Word said, apart from you, I can do nothing." Colby emphasized that it is not something, it is nothing. He said he learned to rely less on his own opinions and instead seek guidance from the Lord, as only He knows what is truly best for us. As a result, Colby now makes plans with the understanding that the Holy Spirit ultimately determines the outcome. Additionally, he mentioned how a man plans but the Lord establishes his steps.

Gavin shared that his experiences with the Holy Spirit have not only strengthened his relationship with Jesus but also his commitment to serving in the church. He said, "The Holy Spirit of God is what has empowered my commitment to Christian life and my church life." He believes that the presence of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit have led him to make many good, Godly decisions. Gavin longs for this spiritual connection, especially within a community setting. He said, "I pine for the Holy Spirit." While admitting to occasional decisions made to please other leaders, he emphasized his reliance on the Holy Spirit's guidance to pave the way for God's vision within the church.

Payton recounted a recent situation within her church community. She had never known of someone being expelled from the church before. She shared that her pastor informed her that he suggested the individual in question find another church that would be a better fit for them. She said the pastor followed through with his decision and took action. She mentioned that he is known for his decisive actions and counseling skills, having helped many people through tough times. Payton trusted her pastor's wisdom, as he had accompanied her during her legal troubles and always seemed to know the right thing to do. Furthermore, she shared that the pastor and his wife's actions and interactions with the church community and children demonstrate their embodiment of the fruits of the spirit, not just in a visual sense, but also spiritually.

Holy Spirit's Power and Manifestation. The participants believe in the power and wisdom available through faith and listening to the Holy Spirit. Hayden shared an incident where a local business was hosting drag shows nearby, and other church leaders from different congregations were calling him, asking if they should take action and protest. However, Hayden knew that protesting would only turn them into villains in the eyes of the media. Instead, he suggested that they pray and ask God to intervene. They continued to pray for about a week until they received news that the drag show was canceled. He said they trusted in the Holy Spirit to guide them. Hayden said, "We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and in him leading us in the direction we're to take and the things that we do, always. The Holy Spirit is our guide."

Gavin mentioned that we need to rely on the supernatural power and wisdom that come from our God. He believes that this power and wisdom are available through faith. Gavin suggested that church leaders should come together and pray, worship, and trust with all their hearts that God will guide them toward revitalization.

Participants also shared feeling the Holy Spirit's guidance and protection in their lives. Mason recounted an encounter with a girl named Angel, who unwittingly prevented him from being involved in an accident. He had intended to ride in a friend's car but instead engaged in conversation with her. Remarkably, no one else seemed to have seen her, and Mason revealed that he had experienced similar inexplicable occurrences throughout his life. He said, "God, I feel you. I hear you. You're real… I realized the Holy Spirit was always there." Payton shared an occasion where she suddenly felt an intense intuition, which she believed was the Holy Spirit, telling her that "today is not the day." Despite not fully understanding the message, she trusted it and has since become more open to hearing the Holy Spirit's guidance. Payton said, "It's so loud to the point I could not ignore it… I'm not gonna ignore that. I'm not ignoring that… It was

undeniable… I heard a warning." She mentioned that she remains alert to the enemy's influence, and takes a moment to pause and listen when faced with decisions. Payton recalled feeling excited yet cautious about the warning and has learned to be more receptive to the Holy Spirit's voice.

Spiritual Maturity

Lack of Connection to the Holy Spirit. The participants emphasized the importance of developing a relationship with the Holy Spirit for a deeper connection with God. Colby shared how he noticed that in Baptist churches in the South, the Holy Spirit is not talked about as much as God and Christ. He said even though we worship the Trinity, we tend to forget the Holy Spirit. He believes it is a missing element that is not given enough attention. He said, "When you got saved… you prayed to God, and you received the Holy Spirit, and that's it. It's never mentioned again." Colby mentioned he is not sure why this is the case, and he has never heard an explanation for it from leadership. While the Holy Spirit is acknowledged to exist, Colby thinks the Holy Spirit is not prayed to or asked for guidance as much as the Spirit should be. He thinks this is a big part of who we worship, and it is essential to our continued relationship with God. He believes we need to develop our relationship with the Holy Spirit, who convicts us and continues working inside us. He mentioned how Jesus left us with the Holy Spirit, which is a big part of our spiritual journey. He thinks that when we do not realize or are not reminded that we have God's spirit inside us, it is easy to compartmentalize our faith and only think about it on Sundays. He said, "It's very easy to be like, well, Jesus is a Sunday thing, so I'm gonna do whatever the heck I want from Monday to Saturday." He believes this is something that needs to be addressed by church leaders to help us deepen our spiritual intelligence and relationship with God.

Colby shared his personal experience of how he did not spend a lot of time praying or talking to the Holy Spirit. He used to think that he could fix everything on Sundays. However, Colby came to realize that the Spirit of God lives inside us, which means that we need to seek Him every day, every minute, and every second. He said, "It's a daily, minute-by-minute, constant thing of daily bread, daily seeking." Unfortunately, he thinks that this is missing in many people's lives. He said has not seen it in the past three years of experience at his church.

In Payton's view, the Holy Spirit embodies Jesus' voice and presence on earth. Through personal experience, she has come to understand the need for a relationship with the Holy Spirit. She believes that without such a relationship, it is impossible to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit. She said, "I can't recognize the voice of somebody who I don't know." Payton acknowledged that this relationship was absent from her life for a long time, as she was led to believe that simply believing in God was enough. However, Payton now understands that a personal relationship with Christ is crucial. For about 40 years, she relied on her own strength and did not consider the possibility of seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. It was not until later that Payton realized the importance of walking with Jesus and cultivating a deeper connection with the Holy Spirit.

Joanne admitted to a time in her ministry when she was not as spiritually connected as she ought to have been, instead engaging in worldly activities. She shared that despite continuing to fulfill her duties as a minister, she found herself lacking in productivity and could discern that her words were not as mature or reflective of her true beliefs as they should have been. Joanne said had she been more attuned to her spiritual growth and closer to the Lord, her words and work would have been more aligned with her values.

Quenching the Spirit Through Disobedience. Participants stressed the importance of not quenching the Spirit through disobedience and judgmental behavior in churches. Liam shared his concern that his church may have missed out on a blessing from God due to disobedience. He said, "They're leaning on their own understanding… God had a great blessing for them and now he's dispersing his people in different directions." He acknowledged that over the past ten years, the church faced challenges regarding its finances and attendance, and did not witness significant spiritual growth. However, Liam added that in more recent times, the church had surrendered to the Lord and was now experiencing more unity and love. He said, "The Holy Spirit can be felt during services" compared to the past where there has been little presence of the Holy Spirit.

Joanne noted that Scripture advises us not to quench the Spirit. Unfortunately, she believes many activities in churches today seem to quench the Spirit, particularly when people are overly judgmental. For Joanne, this is a sign of spiritual immaturity. During her time attending a particular church, she saw people looking down on others. She believes having spiritually mature individuals in your congregation greatly minimizes conflicts. She explained that conflicts typically arise from a person who lacks spiritual maturity. In Joanne's experience, such individuals often insist on controversial matters and disregard others' opinions while pursuing their own desires.

Table 4: Emergent Themes and Categories for RQ4

Themes	Categories
Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding the Role of the Holy Spirit (RQ4)	
Guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit	Guidance of the Holy Spirit Relying on the Holy Spirit Holy Spirit as source of strength Holy Spirit's power and manifestation
Spiritual maturity	Lack of connection to the Holy Spirit Quenching the Spirit through disobedience

RQ5. Lived Experiences Related to Church Growth and Revitalization

RQ5 asked: "What are the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders related to church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina?" The themes that emerged from this research question include *Identifying Church-Related Challenges* and *Fostering Church Health*.

Identifying Church-Related Challenges

Recognizing Divisiveness and Conflict. When assessing the overall well-being of their congregation, participants were able to pinpoint cases of discord and disagreement. Liam recounted his experience of joining a church where there was a lot of division and conflict between members, including the pastor. He shared that his church was not welcoming to certain individuals based on their appearance and attire. He believes this could lead to people feeling excluded and turning to other places where they feel more welcomed. Liam noted that at times, "A bar is more welcoming than a church." Joanne shared that she once served in a church located in a remote area, commonly referred to as the $1,000,000 church. A member of the church who had invested in Coca-Cola left her stock to the church upon her demise. The church was surprised to find that the stock was worth over $1,000,000, which they eventually sold and deposited the proceeds into a bank account. During her time there, Joanne noticed that there was a lot of argument about how to use the funds. She observed a deep division among the members, with one half refusing to acknowledge the other. This was a difficult situation for Joanne, as she had never encountered such a severe conflict in her eight years of service at other churches. While some progress was made, it was still a challenging environment when she left. Joanne questioned why she was sent to that church. She said, "I asked the Lord a lot of times, why did you send me here, Lord?" Eventually, a lady revealed that Joanne was there for her. However,

Joanne said, "It was a hard church to serve in because of the division and the divided hearts there."

Identifying Issues with Worship Music. The participants reported experiences with worship music. Noah mentioned that he initially attended a smaller church with subpar music, almost like karaoke. He said, "The music was just horrible. I mean, it really was. It was bad. It was bad." Similarly, Olivia shared that she found the music to be lacking in quality at her church and felt that the theological aspect had not been taken into consideration. According to Mason, his church was once a thriving and full church with great worship. He shared that when he first started attending three years ago, he tried to help out as much as possible, including joining the worship team. He said the worship leader, who is a wonderful person, may not be the best fit for leading worship. While Mason has been able to assist and improve the worship leader's abilities to some extent, he said, "He's just not great at leading worship. There's just no way. He's better now because I helped him a lot but he's still not that great."

Gavin mentioned that in his role as a worship leader and ordained minister, he planned a worship night with the goal of helping people connect with the Holy Spirit in a profound way. His hope was that attendees would feel comfortable expressing themselves through song. Gavin said, "My intention was to encourage people to raise their hands to God and release all of their burdens and cares to Him in the midst of a song." Unfortunately, the pastor expressed concern that this approach might not be well-received by everyone. Gavin noted that church leaders should strive to create an environment that welcomes the presence of God so that the Holy Spirit can revitalize the church.

Growth of Children's and Youth Ministries. The participants provided an update on the growth of children's and youth ministries at their church. Liam mentioned how the children's

ministry at his church has grown, but overall, the church has seen a decline in attendance. He expressed concern that the church is still divided and enforces strict rules that make some churchgoers feel unwelcome. On a more positive note, Noah reported that the youth group at his church expanded, and the church underwent both positive and transformative changes. Noah expressed his satisfaction with his current church, which has doubled in size over the past two years, offering a wider range of small groups, missions, community outreach, and schooling. When he first began attending his church two years ago, he recalled the youth group for high school students had around 100 attendees. He said, "It was still a big youth group." However, they have since formed small groups that meet weekly, culminating in a monthly worship event. Noah noted that the most recent gathering saw an impressive turnout of 450 high school students alone, with the younger age groups nearly tripling in size.

Olivia shared that her church has a School of Music and a School of Digital Technology, and how they are constantly adding new programs to meet the needs of the community. She said, "They just keep adding stuff, and I mean, it's crazy to think that these are needs that we didn't even know were around." She admired the church's approach of creating its own curriculums, even for the children's ministry, to ensure that the younger members of the congregation are both fulfilled and learning. Olivia believes that this approach will prepare children to accept Christ and find their salvation when the time is right.

Change in Church Attendance. There has been a noticeable change in church attendance among the participants' congregations. Noah mentioned that due to growth in attendance, his church had to hold multiple services to accommodate everyone. He said, "You couldn't fit everybody in at the same time." Olivia shared that her church experienced significant

growth largely due to its emphasis on meeting the needs of the congregation. She noted, "Just in the last two years, they've more than doubled their size."

Hayden arrived at a church that had been without a pastor for a year, and attendance on Sundays had dwindled to 40-45 people. He said the interim pastor, who was in his early 80s at the time, was a wonderful pastor and had led the church through some necessary changes. Hayden noted that he started preaching at the church three months before he was officially voted in as the pastor. He shared that he began preaching in January 2020, and by then, they had an average attendance of about 65 people. But then, COVID-19 hit in February 2020, prompting the church to adapt to online and outdoor services. Despite these challenges, Hayden said their membership kept growing, and they now have an average attendance of about 210 people on Sunday mornings. He attributes this to their unwavering focus on Jesus. He said,

> I always encourage them to just keep your eyes on Jesus. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus.
> We had a suicide about a year and a half ago that really devastated part of the church and
> some things surrounding that really hurt. But even through all that, there was constant
> growth because people were constantly, they had their focus on inviting their neighbors
> and going out there talking to people. And so, we just seen that continue, constant growth
> as we go and keep our eyes on Jesus and do His will, you know.

On the other hand, Mason noticed a decline in attendance at his church, which he attributed to a lack of accountability and the departure of a youth pastor who was not replaced. Mason believes that having a dedicated youth pastor is essential for a church's future, as they play a crucial role in guiding and nurturing the next generation. He said, "That's strike two because remember, you got to have a youth pastor that's truly taking care of your kids. That's your future."

Shaping the Church Culture. The participants shared their experiences and insights on church culture. Olivia mentioned that the youth at her church have their own designated section during church service. She shared a personal experience of growing up in a church where the

youth group served as a safe space for open sharing. However, she noted that not having youth represented in the main service can hinder their comfort in the sanctuary. She said, "You still want those kids to be comfortable whenever they walk into the sanctuary, and if they're constantly relying on the youth house, they're not going to be comfortable in the sanctuary." She mentioned that as young adults, it may be difficult to relate to the church service if they have never had the opportunity to participate. Olivia questioned where the youth would go after outgrowing the youth group, emphasizing the importance of creating a welcoming environment for all members of the church.

Noah brought up the issue of churches losing their youth after high school, and he attributed it to the separation between the youth and the main service. He suggested that involving young people in the inner workings of the church, teaching them to serve, and going into the community to do things would help them feel more connected to the church. Olivia emphasized the importance of action and servitude over just listening to the message. Noah believes that this approach would work for all ages, not just the youth. He said, "If you're involved, whether it's music ministry or all you do is, for men's breakfast once a month, you're the guy that's flipping the pancakes, you still feel involved when you do that versus just sitting there." Similarly, Olivia mentioned that the same applies to greeters.

According to Mason, it is important to keep in mind that as you continue to grow, certain things that were once acceptable may no longer fit into your life. He highlighted that this is something that has taken the church a while to fully understand. He believes as a church's growth surpasses a certain threshold, it becomes imperative to establish a well-conceived children's ministry. It is important to appoint a dedicated individual to oversee the children's welfare, considering that they are the future of the organization. He said,

You can't just have a granny in the back. You can have granny in the back, but once you're past that point, you can't go back to granny in the back. Once your growth is past that, and this church has taken a long time to figure that out for some reason. I don't know what it is, so now that church is down, down, down. So, it just kept going down, down, down.

Mason also discussed the challenges faced by the Southern Baptist church and its culture during COVID-19. He mentioned that worship got stronger after 9/11, but COVID-19 changed everything in 2020. Mason talked about what it was like when almost all the seats were empty. He said it was about playing music for nobody but God during COVID.

Colby was concerned that the spiritual growth at his church only goes up to a certain point, and they do not aim for anything more than that. He said,

Let's say meat is ten and milk is one, they're only hitting a four… They're not aiming for anything more and I would have thought it was in the home groups, but I've been part of a home group, and they don't go deeper there either.

Hayden expressed that a number of churches are falling around them, and some members are leaving and coming to their church because of their stance against abortion and LGBTQ+. He said many people are searching for a sense of community and belonging. He believes it is not uncommon for individuals to endure physical harm to join a gang or repeatedly frequent the same bars or clubs because they share something in common with others who are hurting. He said their hope is to offer a better option by inviting those who are hurting to be a part of God's family where they can find love, support, and joy. He said that real love can be found at their church, and it is one of the keys to our culture. As society continues to decay, he said more people are realizing that drugs and alcohol are a bottomless pit. He said, "There is a way out and that way out is to turn and know Jesus is Lord and then let him bring you into an awesome family."

Gavin shared that upon his arrival, the pastor was embarking on a new vision from God. However, Gavin noticed that the church model seemed to be the central focus and at times, it was overwhelming. He said they had grown and flourished, leaning into their true strengths. The culture of the church now centers around genuine friendliness, fellowship, and a heartfelt welcome to all. He said, "I believe the church found its greatest strength in uniting people with a Christ-centered love. I believe this strength was ordained by God for this particular church to thrive in." Gavin mentioned that he witnessed this strength firsthand, but now it seems to be even more prominent and serves as a foundation to connect people to Jesus and to one another.

Payton described her church as a consistent and close-knit community where the staff, message, and pastor are all reliable. She said, "It's a quaint, close church and the people are kind." She attributed the church's growth to the Holy Spirit and the recognition of the fruits of the Spirit. She said, "People are recognizing the fruits of the Spirit from that church. Maybe it's not about the fancy band and all the snacks and things and the loudness of it all. you know." She added, "The music took some getting used to at my church because they're hymns and hymnals." She mentioned that the church is welcoming and friendly, with someone always available to greet newcomers and provide assistance. She said, "You walk in, and you instantly feel welcome. It's not like you walk in and you're just kind of standing there like, what do I do? Where do I go? There's always somebody." Payton appreciates the simplicity of the church, where the message is loud and clear, and distractions are minimal.

According to Joanne, there has been a cultural shift at her church. She attributes this change to the influence of the Holy Spirit, which has led many to relinquish their personal opinions. Although it took some time for the church to thrive after receiving a significant amount of money, it seems to be doing well now. However, during the period of division that followed

the influx of funds, it was only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the church was able to overcome its challenges.

Joanne also shared how she had encountered a situation where a church member was discontent with the preacher, music, and overall atmosphere of the church. Despite constant complaints, the member continued to attend. Joanne finally suggested that if the member did not enjoy being there, he should consider finding a different church that better suited their preferences. Surprisingly, the member took her advice and left. Joanne believed that disrupting the church was unnecessary and encouraged the one member to find a more suitable place for themselves.

Challenges with Leadership. Participants brought up challenges they faced with leadership. Some of the challenges include questionable teachings and the narrow-mindedness of some churches. Hayden shared that he and others have had to confront questionable teachings that have attempted to slip into their church. He said, "I don't do isms, isms cause schisms. So, let's just stay in the Word." He noted some of these teachings include strange beliefs about prayer, Jewish teaching, and Calvinism. He said, "A lot of times, it's just correcting an error in teaching, making sure we don't let it go any further." Mason shared his experience with a new pastor who has yet to demonstrate his leadership capabilities. He mentioned how pastors today are not balanced in their teachings about God's love and God's wrath. Brody also shared that he recently organized an event that saw a significant increase in attendance, from a town event to a county event with 5000-6000 attendees. However, a church that had been a strong supporter of the event withdrew their support because the event was no longer held in their town. He said "One of the churches that was a staunch supporter of that event quit giving, and you know what their response was? Well, you're no longer doing it in our town." Brody's response was to

continue with the event in the county. While he acknowledged the church's sound doctrine and preacher, he criticized their narrow-mindedness and self-centeredness in focusing solely on their own community. He said, "That's self-centeredness, selfishness, ego, pride, and not mission-driven." Brody said he plans to approach the church next year to encourage them to reconsider their stance and provide biblical reproof, as Paul did.

Colby shared how he wants his church to prioritize spiritual growth and meaningful conversations. He mentioned that his church is composed of individuals who are highly motivated and goal-oriented. They do not focus on obstacles and complaints but instead, roll up their sleeves and get the job done. Although this approach has its advantages, Colby feels that there is room for growth in terms of spiritual intelligence. He noted that he has not heard any conversations about the church's spiritual growth, despite their success in areas such as audio-visual, systems, staff, and organization. He said,

> I don't see them ever talking about how this church is spiritually doing great. It's always, they're doing a great job audio visually. They're doing a great job with their systems. They're doing a great job with their staff. They're doing a great job with their organization. But I've never heard them talk about how spiritually, they're in a place where we want to get to, like never.

Colby believes that the church should strive for a deeper connection rather than just focusing on the transactional aspects. Despite his concerns, he has deep respect and appreciation for the work that his church does.

Colby also shared that as a member of the worship team, he often has conversations with fellow churchgoers, many of whom he knows well. He mentioned that outside of church, discussions about God are rare, with only a few exceptions. He said it is a topic that does not come up often. He said, "It's very much like, oh, service was great, wow. There were a lot of people there this week. Oh, it sounded amazing. But those aren't the kinds of responses that I

think are great." He mentioned that that deeper spiritual conversations are more meaningful. He said, "This church, their biggest challenge is not seeing that they're missing that part."

Gavin shared his concerns about the communication style of a leader at his church. He felt that the leader did not take into account the emotional sensitivity of others involved in leadership. He said, "An explanation of why a decision was made to those it affected would've helped keep unity among people." Gavin expressed that being sensitive to others' emotions in church leadership is crucial for maintaining a healthy church environment. He believes it is essential to communicate in a way that addresses any hurt feelings or concerns that may arise. Unlike a factory job, construction company, or corporate bank, Gavin said the church community shares their hearts, lives, and spiritual journeys with each other. He said we are vulnerable to each other, and the primary purpose of the church is not to generate income but to unite people in love and the truth of the Gospel. Gavin also shared that his church has shifted its primary focus from methodology to relationships, which he believes has contributed to its overall growth. He said, "This love for people has always had value, but I think its value to the leadership has superseded its previous focus on the value of the church model."

Joanne shared that she faced obstacles in her ministry because she was a woman, and some people in the church did not believe she should be there. She received complaints about her role as a minister of music, but she prayed and used three principles: considering the source of complaints, looking for truth, and making changes if necessary. Some pastors believed she should not have been in the position, but others were glad she was there and recognized her as a true minister. Joanne said,

> It was more difficult working with pastors who thought that I should not have been in the ministry of music position. One of the last pastors that I worked with, he just told me very frankly one day that I shouldn't be the minister of music. I said, well, do you want to fire me? Because every other pastor that I had worked with, even if they told me they

didn't think I should be in that position, usually within a year they were telling me, "Hey, I'm glad you're here."

She believes that God used her, even though she was a woman. Joanne also expressed concern about the prevalence of family-oriented churches in the area, noting that it can lead to issues when a single family dominates running a church. She noted that this situation can prove detrimental unless the family members are truly committed to the church's mission and not simply following the desires of their relatives.

Fostering Church Health

Adopting a Biblical Approach. Participants shared their views on revitalizing and growing the church. Liam suggested that the church should be biblical and not judge people based on their outward appearance. It should instead focus on loving others with their hearts. Liam argued that following the Word of the Lord means accepting everyone who comes to Him without any prejudice or discrimination. He said, "The Lord would never turn anybody away for any reason." Mason emphasized the importance of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, and God. He shared that he expressed this sentiment on his personal Facebook page, noting that God is vast and powerful. Unfortunately, he said many churches do not portray God in this light, instead presenting Him as manipulative or demanding. Mason said,

> The point I'm making is God is big. The churches don't teach God as being big. They teach him as being manipulative or manipulatable, or just waiting for you to screw up kind of a thing, or you gotta do all this stuff before you can you know. That's not how he is. He's big. He's big enough to be that thunder, but he's also big enough to be the little feather.

To revive a church, Brody suggested restoring its original New Testament narrative rather than following Western cultural practices. He recollected a communication he had received six years prior. The message conveyed, "He ain't doing nothing new. He's doing something old… the reason people don't recognize it is because they're not doing things

biblically as they were done in the first century of the New Testament." At the time, Brody had a

personal motto that unknowingly resonated with the sender's message: "We're doing something

so old it looks new, and people don't recognize it." Brody also believes that churches could

benefit from stronger leadership. He mentioned how he speaks from personal experience, having

assisted volunteers in ways that pastors, elders, and mentors have not. Additionally, he said he

does not tolerate undisciplined individuals who prioritize social justice or injustice issues, as

those are not the focus of his ministry. He said, "I don't let them mentor alongside of me." Brody

shared that one of his trusted associates left due to edification. To handle the situation with

wisdom, he sought wise counsel, spent eight months in prayer, and fasted. He said that even after

approaching the matter biblically, the individual still chose to depart. Despite this, Brody

prioritized their well-being and chose to release them from their responsibilities in the ministry.

Brody said, "I'm telling you, as a result of not caring if the ministry died, it's grown to the

national level." He noted,

> Out of 500 or so that followed Jesus, there was only 120 + 11 left in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. The average size of the church in the United States right now is around 135 to 150. I would think that God, somewhere along the line, decided that that was the process of edification and being able to have the true believer up under you. Because he would even look at some of the 500 sometimes and say I know you've come here just for a meal… You see, he's separated them.

Colby believes that people think being a member of their church is highly enjoyable. He

said, "There's a lot to love about being part of their community and part of the church itself."

Colby described his church community as very structured, intentional, and hard-working. He

said they are focused on helping their local community grow and "making Christ grow." They

have a good heart and do things well, without complaining or grumbling. They celebrate their

staff and volunteers and appreciate them. He said the community is inclusive and welcoming,

which has contributed to their numerical growth.

Gavin humbly admitted that he could not pinpoint a single factor that brought about the transformation he witnessed in the church he led. Nonetheless, he attributed the church's newfound strength to its ability to bring people together through their shared love for Christ. He said this is a divine ordination specific to that particular church. Similarly, Payton admitted that she could not pinpoint the primary reason for the growth of her church. She believes that it was due to the Holy Spirit, and perhaps people were beginning to recognize this amidst all the negativity in the world. Lastly, Joanne said, "I've worked with a couple of pastors, and we would be talking about certain situations in the church, and they would say, 'Sometimes, we need a funeral.'" She conveyed that for something to regrow, something else has to pass away.

Emphasis on Serving Others. Participants described their church's focus on serving others. For Noah, a healthy church is not just about the size of the youth group, but also what they are doing to inspire dedication among the kids. Rather than having high school classes on Sunday mornings, they encourage their students to volunteer in various capacities throughout the church. He said, "They'll have their small groups during the week, but then on the Sunday, they're volunteering." Even middle school students assist in the nursery, demonstrating the church's emphasis on serving one another and the broader community. He said it is inspiring to see such a commitment to service across all age groups. He said, "They're really pushing serving each other, serving the community… which is cool."

Hayden believes that there is a lot of hunger in the area and people are looking for a sense of belonging. He said that he tells members of the church they should be looking for people who are hurting and reach out to them, pray with them, encourage them, and provide help wherever possible. His church lets the community know about their initiatives and shares pictures of their projects on platforms like Facebook. They try to help everyone, not just members of the church,

and be the light that shines before others so that they can see the good works and glorify the

Father in heaven.

Table 5: Emergent Themes and Categories for RQ5

Themes	Categories
Lived Experiences Related to Church Growth and Revitalization (RQ5)	
Identifying church-related challenges	Divisiveness and conflict Issues with worship music Growth of children's and youth ministries Change in church attendance Shaping the church culture Challenges with leadership
Fostering church health	Adopting a biblical approach Emphasis on serving others

Evaluation of the Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design and utilized phenomenological methods

to explore the topic of church growth and revitalization. Phenomenology, as a research method,

aims to comprehend the subjective meanings of the participant's experiences (Kvale &

Brinkmann, 2015). It is instrumental in understanding experiences and the meanings attached to

them (Van Manen, 2014). The study's qualitative approach was appropriate as it allowed for a

deeper understanding of participants' personal experiences and their perceptions of the

phenomena under consideration. Through open-ended questions, the interviews yielded detailed

descriptions of the participants' experiences within their respective churches and their

interpretations of the events.

The interviews were conducted using semi-structured and open-ended questions, which

were tailored to address individual research questions and gather the views and opinions of the

participants. The personal interviews and dialogues helped to gain a more comprehensive

understanding of the participants' church experiences. This researcher asked questions that

encouraged individuals to share their own interpretations of events within their congregations.

Remaining silent during the interviews allowed the participants to speak freely. By engaging in dialogue, this researcher was able to gain insights and identify areas requiring further investigation from the participant's perspective. This approach allowed for a better understanding of the individual experiences within their respective congregations.

The credibility of the study was strengthened by the trustworthy nature of the participants, who each shared unique events. This researcher strived to be as accurate as possible to describe this uniqueness in the participants' own words. To ensure credibility, techniques such as prolonged engagement and persistent observation were employed, as recommended by Lincoln & Guba (2013). In this case, engagement with the participants lasted approximately one hour, and a range of questions was employed to gather well-rounded and detailed data that addressed the research questions. However, since only interviews were conducted, triangulation through document analysis or other data collection processes was not possible, limiting both the research design's credibility and confirmability.

To ensure dependability, this researcher attempted to provide sufficient information so others could replicate the research in their context. The thick descriptions obtained during the interviews made transferability possible. The detailed descriptions of the context by the participants could help others determine if the conclusions apply to them.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study explored church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. Chapter Five describes the study findings and how they relate to the research questions. It addresses the study's theoretical and practical implications, research limitations, and directions for future research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding church growth and revitalization?

RQ2. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of leadership in church growth and revitalization?

RQ3. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role, if any, of digital technology in church growth and revitalization?

RQ4. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in church growth and revitalization?

RQ5. What are the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders related to church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This study has revealed some valuable and meaningful insights regarding the growth and revitalization of Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The findings shed light on the subject of church growth and revitalization and also present significant perspectives that could be useful for church leaders and pastors looking to revitalize their congregations. The

themes that emerged were *Shepherding a Church Community*, *Focus on Outreach and Community*, *Willingness to Change*, *Providing Guidelines for Spiritual Growth*, *Values of Ministry Leadership*, *Benefits of Technology*, *Negative Effects of Technology*, *Guidance and Direction of the Holy Spirit*, *Spiritual Maturity*, *Identifying Church-Related Challenges*, and *Fostering Church Health*.

Conclusions to RQ1: Beliefs About Church Growth and Revitalization

The themes, *Shepherding a Church Community, Focus on Outreach and Community,* and *Willingness to Change*, emerged from RQ1: Beliefs about Church Growth and Revitalization. Fostering a church community and maintaining a focus on the teachings of Jesus and sound biblical instruction are significant for church revitalization. An active and intentional pursuit of spiritual growth among congregants is necessary while ensuring that church life and activities do not deteriorate to merely going through the motions of weekly routines.

Church revitalization involves focusing church efforts on outreach and nurturing a sense of community within the church. It is important to prioritize spreading the message of the Great Commission. The church community should not simply remain within the confines of the church. Creating outreach programs and paying attention to younger generations, such as youth and children, are crucial because these ministries serve as a strong indicator of the church's health. Building relationships and making everyone feel welcome are also essential for supporting the church's growth and revitalization.

Additionally, church revitalization means being open to change. In accordance with Rainer's (2020) analysis of revived churches, pastors and ministry leaders agreed that the statement "change or die" is better expressed as "change and live" (p. 138). Change is inevitable, and churches must be prepared to adapt accordingly.

Conclusions to RQ2: Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Leadership

The themes of *Providing Guidelines for Spiritual Growth* and *Values of Ministry Leadership* emerged from RQ2: Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Leadership. Prayer and worship are fundamental in the lives of pastors and ministry leaders. These church leaders must be guided by the Holy Spirit. It is essential to prioritize intentional discipleship and unwaveringly maintain focus on Jesus and the Word.

Leadership in a church setting involves both shepherding and sacrificial service. This aligns with Northouse's (2019) belief that a leader should adopt a servant-like posture rather than seeking power and status, as well as Pettit's (2008) view that spiritual maturity is about practicing service towards God and others. In church leadership, it is crucial to identify shared values such as empathy, emotional intelligence, love, kindness, humility, and authenticity. Additionally, it is important to focus on empowering and equipping others.

Conclusions to RQ3: Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Digital Technologies

The themes, *Benefits of Technology* and *Negative Effects of Technology*, emerged from RQ3: Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Digital Technologies. Technology can be extremely beneficial when it comes to communication and building relationships. Ministries using technology can offer unique opportunities to connect with and serve their communities. During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, digital technologies played a crucial role in enabling churches to conduct their services and maintain a semblance of community interaction. The use of technology allowed for the continuation of essential religious practices despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic. Additionally, using technology in worship settings can offer a range of benefits that contribute to an enhanced worship experience and streamlined processes. For instance, sound quality and visual aids can be improved to create an

atmosphere that encourages congregational participation and praise. Furthermore, software applications and smartphones can be used to facilitate efficient communication and information sharing among individuals and groups. Such advancements simplified once arduous tasks and improved the worship experience. However, the rise of digital technologies has also sparked strong negative opinions about its impact on Christianity. Before digital technologies, evangelical efforts were more effective as people focused on building genuine connections.

Laufer et al. (2021) pointed out that there are both opportunities and barriers when it comes to individual access to technology and devices. Similarly, in this study, all of the pastors and ministry leaders interviewed acknowledged the negative impacts of technology. Many churches face the challenge of digital literacy, and there is apprehension regarding the potential of technology to impede spiritual growth. Furthermore, there is a growing concern that the present generation is being conditioned to accept only what they can visually perceive. This sentiment is echoed by Trozzo (2021), who argues that the rise of digital technologies has shifted focus away from written words and toward still and animated images. Lastly, churches have encountered several mistakes in their approach to technology, most of which could have been avoided by being more technologically savvy.

Conclusions to RQ4: Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding the Holy Spirit

The themes, *Guidance and Direction of the Holy Spirit* and *Spiritual Maturity*, emerged from RQ4: Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding the Holy Spirit. The participants firmly believe that guidance from the Holy Spirit is essential for church growth and revitalization. Emphasizing reliance on the Holy Spirit, rather than on oneself, is crucial for church leaders. The Holy Spirit is seen as a source of strength and power. Pastors and ministry leaders seek to draw strength and experience the power and manifestations of the Holy Spirit in their lives. However, there are

pastors and ministry leaders who previously lacked a meaningful connection to the Holy Spirit, potentially affecting their leadership and spiritual guidance. Furthermore, disobedience can quench the Holy Spirit and hinder church revitalization and spiritual maturity.

Conclusions to RQ5: Lived Experiences Related to Church Growth and Revitalization

The themes, *Identifying Church-Related Challenges* and *Fostering Church Health* emerged from RQ5: Lived Experiences Related to Church Growth and Revitalization. The participants have observed progress in their churches over the years, noting positive changes in the church culture since their initial involvement. Despite facing challenges, they have successfully overcome obstacles to cultivate thriving communities. Concerns regarding church growth and revitalization involved issues related to divisiveness, conflict, and worship music. It is notable that children and youth ministries are significant indicators of church health. Furthermore, making an honest assessment of church culture, changes in attendance numbers, and the impact of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic on the community is essential for pastors and ministry leaders. Challenges in leadership comprised the influence of deacons and pastors, changes in leadership, and discernment regarding false teachings, misplaced priorities, and views on gender roles.

Adopting a biblical approach and emphasizing a commitment to serving others are crucial for revitalizing a church. A biblical approach entails staying grounded in Jesus, seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, rising above superficiality, understanding the essence of revitalization, and focusing on the teachings of the New Testament. A healthy church actively engages with the community through dedicated service and by welcoming children. A revitalized church is focused on advancing the Kingdom and avoids engaging in competitive practices that may impede efforts to revitalize the church. Effective church leaders prioritize the well-being of their

congregation and encourage active participation in volunteer activities. They strive to help everyone, not just those within the church, and be a positive influence for others to see the good works and glorify God.

The study yielded significant findings such as the importance of the shepherd's role in sound biblical teaching, focusing on Jesus and spiritual maturity. It also emphasized the importance of being attentive and conscientious in church life and activities. Another notable finding is the value of an outward focus and community, highlighting outreach and the fulfillment of the Great Commission and Jesus' mandate to make disciples. Lastly, the study emphasized the importance of identifying and addressing church-related challenges. An honest assessment is crucial to avoid being blind to reality, and church leaders must carefully consider and evaluate their practices.

Table 6: Emergent Themes and Categories

Themes	Categories
Beliefs About Church Growth and Revitalization (RQ1)	
Shepherding a church community	Sound biblical teaching Focus on Jesus Avoid going through the motions Spiritual growth
Focus on outreach and community	The Great Commission Outreach ministry Next generation Focus on relationships Welcoming to everyone
Willingness to change	Inevitability of change Adapting to change
Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Leadership (RQ2)	
Providing guidelines for spiritual growth	Pray and worship Be Holy Spirit-driven Intentional discipleship Focus on the Word Focus on Jesus

Values of ministry leadership	Shepherding Serving sacrificially Empathy and emotional intelligence Show love and kindness Humility Authentic Empower and equip others
Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding Digital Technology (RQ3)	
Benefits of technology	Communication and relationship-building Opportunities to connect and serve COVID-19 response Enhancing worship Simplifying tasks
Negative effects of technology	Digital literacy Distraction from spiritual maturity Church technology mistakes
Beliefs and Perceptions Regarding the Role of the Holy Spirit (RQ4)	
Guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit	Guidance of the Holy Spirit Relying on the Holy Spirit Holy Spirit as source of strength Holy Spirit's power and manifestation
Spiritual maturity	Lack of connection to the Holy Spirit Quenching the Spirit through disobedience
Lived Experiences Related to Church Growth and Revitalization (RQ5)	
Identifying church-related challenges	Recognizing divisiveness and conflict Identifying issues with worship music Growth of children's and youth ministries Change in church attendance Shaping the church culture Challenges with leadership
Fostering church health	Adopting a biblical approach Emphasis on serving others

Implications and Applications

The study implies that there are Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina that have experienced or are currently experiencing church growth and revitalization. Exploring the

reasons behind the growth and revitalization of churches can offer valuable insights into this phenomenon. This study examined the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders of Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The study's findings directly support Rainer's (2020) central thesis about revived churches, which suggests that those who make significant changes are more likely to thrive. The conclusions also take into account the ongoing trend toward secularization in American society during the 21st century (Smith, 2021), as well as the historical significance of religion in local communities (Chaves, 2017). The study followed the recommendation by Barna (2018) to supplement research on the general population with studies conducted in a more local context to gain a better understanding of these experiences within the broader community. The study highlights the importance of struggling churches recognizing the need for significant changes and a shift in their approach to ministry (Mohler, 2015). It also underscores the importance of a thriving church conducting an honest assessment and striving for improvement with the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Cook & Lawless, 2019).

The study's findings suggest that an individual's spiritual growth and ministry leadership values play a crucial role in leading a church community. The study also indicates that pastors and ministry leaders are guided and directed by the Holy Spirit in their efforts to shepherd the church community, extend outreach to the community, and foster a positive church environment. This study provides valuable insights for church leaders, enabling them to identify critical issues and devise effective solutions for challenges associated with ministry leadership. It also offers in-depth descriptions that help leaders evaluate the relevance of the findings to their own situations and assess the vitality of their church community. Furthermore, the study presents guidelines for nurturing a healthy church community, promoting spiritual growth, cultivating the values of effective ministry leadership, leveraging technology, and fostering church health.

This researcher gained valuable personal insights into church growth and revitalization that exceeded his initial expectations. The process proved to be more demanding than anticipated, emphasizing the significance of prayer, attentiveness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and taking decisive action when prompted. Additionally, this researcher recognized the significance of embracing change and remaining adaptable, rather than becoming entrenched in specific theories, frameworks, and mental models.

Research Limitations

The study focused on a specific group of individuals, consisting of ten full-time pastors and ministry leaders from Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. While the ten interviews conducted provided valuable insights, a larger sample size and broader geographic scope could have yielded even more meaningful perspectives on the phenomena of church growth and revitalization. Participant demographic data regarding their age, tenure, title, ministry training, and educational level was not collected. Furthermore, the study focused on churches that experienced 10% growth at some point within the last five years, increasing the possibility of bias toward positive experiences.

Further Research

This study has produced valuable data on the subject of church growth and revitalization. There is potential for further research to provide even deeper insights into this topic. This study was delimited to Southern Baptist churches located in coastal North Carolina, with full-time pastors and ministry leaders participating. However, there are multiple ways in which this study can be replicated in the future. For instance, the procedures used in this study can be applied to explore church growth and revitalization phenomena in different geographic locations. They can also be used to investigate other denominations besides Southern Baptist. Additionally,

expanding the study population to include members of the congregation is another possibility. Another suggestion is to explore the individual topics of church revitalization, leadership, digital technologies, the Holy Spirit, and lived experiences separately. Finally, the research procedures can be used to study specific cases of churches that have experienced growth and revitalization.

Summary

This study explored the perspectives of pastors and ministry leaders on church growth and revitalization in Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. It used qualitative research methods to gain insights into various aspects of church health. The research has provided a comprehensive analysis of factors that impact church growth and has identified several key strategies that could be employed to revitalize a church.

Overall, this study has contributed to the ongoing conversation on church growth and revitalization and has offered practical recommendations for achieving it. Empirical data in this study supports Rainer's (2020) theory that revived churches are able to adapt to cultural shifts and engage with the changing world. However, the most significant takeaway is the importance of pastors and ministry leaders focusing on Jesus and exemplifying his leadership and spiritual maturity.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 4, 2023

Paolo Santos
Melody Smith

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-277 A Phenomenological Study of Church Revitalization in Coastal North Carolina

Dear Paolo Santos, Melody Smith,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Pastor/Ministry Leader,

As a doctoral candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to explore church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and be a ministry leader or full-time pastor in a Southern Baptist church in coastal North Carolina that has experienced a minimum of 10% growth at some period within the last five years. Participants will be asked to take part in a one-on-one, audio/video-recorded, in-person interview. It should take approximately one hour to complete the procedure listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed and the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Paolo Santos
Doctoral Candidate
▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM
Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Church Revitalization in Coastal North Carolina
Principal Investigator: Paolo Santos, Doctoral Candidate, Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and be a ministry leader or full-time pastor in a Southern Baptist church in coastal North Carolina that has experienced a minimum of 10% growth at some period within the last five years. 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.

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

The purpose of the study is to explore church growth and revitalization within Southern Baptist churches in coastal North Carolina. The study seeks to gain insights into the perspectives and mindsets of pastors and ministry leaders regarding numerical expansion, spiritual awakening, leadership, digital technologies, the Holy Spirit, and their lived experiences regarding church health.

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:

1. Participate in an in-person, audio/video-recorded, one-on-one interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. If applicable, allow the researcher to use any documents that would be relevant to this study. Any such written documents will be used under a pseudonym. No real names of participants or churches will be used.

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 include additional empirical data that support theories on the topic of church growth and revitalization.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating 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 private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Electronic data will be stored on a password-locked computer. Hardcopy data will be stored in a locked drawer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

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. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, 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 Paolo Santos. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Melody Smith, 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 IRB. Our physical address is

Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is 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 study team 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-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

RQ1. Church Growth and Revitalization

Q1. How would you describe a healthy local church in the community? How about one that is facing challenges? How do these descriptions relate to numerical and spiritual growth? What are your thoughts on Rainer's anatomy of revived churches?

Q2. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus' message to Ephesus is that they have left their first love. Would you see any connection this verse might have to the idea of church revitalization?

Q3. North Carolina Baptists offer a church revitalization assessment, and they delve into the message of Haggai 1:5. In this passage, the Lord urges His people to reflect on their actions and realign with His mission. This verse emphasizes the significance of reflecting on one's actions and making changes where necessary. How would you connect this verse to the idea of church revitalization?

Q4. Have you ever given a sermon or conducted training on church growth and revitalization? If so, do you have any materials such as a sermon outline, manuscript, teaching notes, or recording that you could share with me to use as reference?

RQ2. Leadership

Q5. If you were thinking about giving a list of important duties to a pastor to help revive their church, what tasks do you think should be on that list?

Q6. Do you think that helping the church grow in numbers and maturity is better suited for a certain type of person? What kind of person?

Q7. Could you share some leadership qualities that you think would be helpful in promoting the growth and renewal of a church? Can you give an example from your own experience?

Q8. As I was learning about Christian leadership, I noticed some common phrases that kept popping up. I would like to share three of them with you and hear your thoughts on how these concepts contribute to a healthy church: shepherd, servant leadership, and emotional intelligence.

RQ3. Digital Technology

Q9. Digital Technologies include electronic tools, devices, and resources such as computers, audiovisual equipment, church management software, the Internet, and mobile phone apps. Would you do anything differently regarding the use of digital technology?

Q10. Is there anything you have seen from other churches that you think would be helpful or harmful, without mentioning any particular group?

RQ4. Holy Spirit

Q11. What would you consider the role of the Holy Spirit to be in the area of church revitalization? Can you give an example from your own experience?

Q12. In addition to numerical growth, how would you describe the peoples' spiritual growth or maturity within the congregation? Can you give any examples?

Q13. Have you ever found yourself depending only on your own skills instead of seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, particularly when things are going well? If so, can you give some details about that experience?

Q14. Similarly, were there times you felt at a loss in your own resources and felt like you saw the Holy Spirit provide in some way?

RQ5. Lived Experiences

Q15. Would you share with me a description of your church when you first arrived and one from today?

Q16. In what ways can you describe the change of culture between then and now?

Q17. Could you provide insight into any church health-related obstacles that your church has encountered?

Q18. Can you tell me what was the main factor that helped bring new life to your church?

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introductions

[Retrieve signed consent form]. My name is Paolo Santos. I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University and my study explores the phenomena of church growth and revitalization.

> **RQ1.** What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding church growth and revitalization?

1. How would you describe a healthy local church in the community? How about one that is facing challenges? How do these descriptions relate to numerical and spiritual growth? What are your thoughts on Rainer's anatomy of revived churches?

   [Refer to the Information Card].

   > So, what is the central thesis of our anatomy of revived churches. [*sic*] In essence, the revived churches chose to live. That choice was arduous. That choice was challenging. That choice was painstakingly slow at times. That choice was almost always painful. That choice required church members and leaders to put God and others before themselves. That choice was sacrificial. But in the final analysis, that choice was a choice of life. Here is the complement of "change or die." It is "change and live." The good news is that we are discovering thousands of churches that are making the decision to live. The great news is one more church can be added to their number. That church can be your church (Rainer, 2020, p. 138).

2. In the Book of Revelation, Jesus' message to Ephesus is that they have left their first love. Would you see any connection this verse might have to the idea of church revitalization?

   [Refer to the Information Card].

   > "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be* false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God' (*New American Standard Bible,* 1971/1995, Revelation 2:1-7).

3. North Carolina Baptists offer a church revitalization assessment, and they delve into the message of Haggai 1:5. In this passage, the Lord urges His people to reflect on their actions and realign with His mission. This verse emphasizes the significance of reflecting on one's actions and making changes where necessary. How would you connect this verse to the idea of church revitalization?

   [Refer to the Information Card]. "Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways!'" (*New American Standard Bible,* 1971/1995, Haggai 1:5).

4. Have you ever given a sermon or conducted training on church growth and revitalization? If so, do you have any materials such as a sermon outline, manuscript, teaching notes, or recording that you could share with me to use as reference?

RQ2. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of leadership in church growth and revitalization?

1. If you were thinking about giving a list of important duties to a pastor to help revive their church, what tasks do you think should be on that list?

2. Do you think that helping the church grow in numbers and maturity is better suited for a certain type of person? What kind of person?

3. Could you share some leadership qualities that you think would be helpful in promoting the growth and renewal of a church? Can you give an example from your own experience?

4. As I was learning about Christian leadership, I noticed some common phrases that kept popping up. I would like to share three of them with you and hear your thoughts on how these concepts contribute to a healthy church: shepherd; servant leadership; emotional intelligence.

RQ3. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role, if any, of digital technology in church growth and revitalization?

1. Digital Technologies include electronic tools, devices, and resources such as computers, audiovisual equipment, church management software, the Internet, and mobile phone apps. Would you do anything differently regarding the use of digital technology?

2. Is there anything you have seen from other churches that you think would be helpful or harmful, without mentioning any particular group?

RQ4. What are the beliefs and perceptions of full-time pastors and ministry leaders in coastal North Carolina regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in church growth and revitalization?

1. What would you consider the role of the Holy Spirit to be in the area of church revitalization? Can you give an example from your own experience?

2. In addition to numerical growth, how would you describe the peoples' spiritual growth or maturity within the congregation? Can you give any examples?

3. Have you ever found yourself depending only on your own skills instead of seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit, particularly when things are going well? If so, can you give some details about that experience?

4. Similarly, were there times you felt at a loss in your own resources and felt like you saw the Holy Spirit provide in some way?

> **RQ5.** What are the lived experiences of full-time pastors and ministry leaders related to church growth and revitalization in coastal North Carolina?

1. Would you share with me a description of your church when you first arrived and one from today?

2. In what ways can you describe the change of culture between then and now?

3. Could you provide insight into any church health-related obstacles that your church has encountered?

4. Can you tell me what was the main factor that helped bring new life to your church?

Closing Comments

Thank you for participating. I would like to share my telephone number and email with you so that we can stay in touch for any future additions or edits. **[Retrieve any documents offered for analysis].**

APPENDIX F: INFORMATION CARD FOR INTERVIEWS

Information Card for Interviews

Haggai 1:5

"Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways!'" (*New American Standard Bible,* 1971/1995, Haggai 1:5).

Revelation 2:1-7

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be* false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place--unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God' (*New American Standard Bible,* 1971/1995, Revelation 2:1-7).

Anatomy of a Revived Church

So, what is the central thesis of our anatomy of revived churches. [*sic*] In essence, the revived churches chose to live. That choice was arduous. That choice was challenging. That choice was painstakingly slow at times. That choice was almost always painful. That choice required church members and leaders to put God and others before themselves. That choice was sacrificial. But in the final analysis, that choice was a choice of life. Here is the complement of "change or die." It is "change and live." The good news is that we are discovering thousands of churches that are making the decision to live. The great news is one more church can be added to their number. That church can be your church (Rainer, 2020, p. 138).