



TRINITY BIBLE COLLEGE & GRADUATE SCHOOL

CHURCH TURNAROUND IN RURAL AMERICA:  
A Survey of Rural Pastors Who Led Turnaround  
after a Season of Plateau or Decline

BY  
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## Abstract

Answering the question, what factors led rural pastors from a season of plateau or decline to turnaround; producing church growth, compelled this research. Spiritual fervency, productive relationships, and community outreach represented the key to turnaround. This thesis sections include; research methodology, literature review, findings and analysis, theological reflections, and application. The research methodology concerning rural church turnaround; focused on the context of the study, research methodology, and obtaining results from the rural context. The literature review included biblical expression, rural ministry challenges, and valuing rural ministry. The empirical research portion addressed findings and analysis from ten interviews of pastors leading turnaround, detailing expected findings, key components, and contributing factors. Expected findings considered programs, leadership factors, pulpit ministry, and other challenges. The key components identified include spiritual fervency, productive relationships, and community outreach. Spiritual fervency examined prayer, spiritual encounters, and personal refreshment. Productive relationships included intentional investment, peer friendship, and relationships among church leaders. Community outreach investigated mentality shift, servanthood, and catalytic ideas. These factors provided the commonalities and framework for turnaround in the ten churches studied. Theological reflections on *Orthodoxy*, *Orthopraxis*, and *Orthopathos* in the rural setting assisted in the reflection and consideration. Applications from the research addressed the following: establishing the call to rural, pursuing spiritual growth, initiating outreach, and establishing relationships. The methodology, literature review, findings and analysis, theological reflections, and application form the major sections of the thesis.



## **Research Question**

What factors led rural pastors from a season of plateau or decline to turnaround;  
producing church growth

# **Church Turnaround in Rural America**

## **Introduction: Reflections on Rural Ministry Revitalization**

Rural church dynamics have impacted my life for the better. The church that I attended as a child and youth functioned in the rural setting. Each of the four churches we have pastored fits the rural narrative. Many of my relationships with other pastors and church members have occurred in the rural context. My current place of ministry in a small community, endured a church split and a season of plateau following this difficult season. Attempting to get through the challenges associated with plateau and decline represents a subject of deep importance on a personal level. My experience with these challenging times and my concern for pastors encountering such times or finding themselves in this battle to bring life to stagnant ministry, served as a motivator for this study. The research question, “What factors led rural pastors from a season of plateau or decline to turnaround producing church growth?” came out of both my personal experience and the experiences of others observed in the rural setting. This research set out to answer that question for those feeling discouraged during plateau or decline. Ten pastors provided insight after experiencing turnaround from plateau or decline; this research explores their accounts gaining insight for other ministers desiring similar breakthrough.

Discouragement and its impact in the rural setting requires reflection and significant consideration. Kathleen Norris wrote in *Acedia and Me* about the ancient term of acedia she explained that the Greek root means the absence of care with the person afflicted by it, either refusing to care or not capable of doing so.<sup>1</sup> Brad Roth, author of *God's Country*, warned against acedia, which he characterized as spiritual despair that causes a lack of care for life, for God, for others and even for ourselves.<sup>2</sup> Roth believed that this element of despair proved challenging in the rural context. Depression and discouragement can represent major challenges for the rural pastor. Whether considered within the context of acedia, spiritual warfare, or clinical depression these times of discouragement impact ministry.

The challenges of life and pastoral leadership can lead ministers to feeling or getting stuck. Moving beyond the challenges of ministry when in plateau or decline seemed an important issue to consider. When a church encounters a season of no growth, discouragement can impact the pastor, leadership, and church members. A church that loses people can move towards despair; leading other members to consider leaving, placing pressure on pastoral leadership to 'righting the ship.' Neil Anderson and Charles Mylander in *Setting Your Church Free* said, "Your leaders may ache over good people who have chosen to go to other churches and left the burdens of ministry to an overworked few."<sup>3</sup> Seasons of plateau and decline tend to impact many within the church, yet the minister tends to carry the weight of the burden during these seasons. Ministers may experience defeat resulting in leaving the church and at times the

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer's Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 3. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 41. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Neil T. Anderson and Charles Mylander, *Setting Your Church Free: A Biblical Plan for Corporate Conflict Resolution* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005), 154-155.

ministry. Pursuing the accounts of ministers that overcame the factors that hinder progress in the rural setting formed the framework for this research. The narrative of pastors that battled through the discouraging times provided a paradigm for others to consider; extending hope to the pastor struggling to establish turnaround. This research set out to discover pathways of optimism for the health of pastors and strength for churches in rural America.

Small church health proved more complicated to assess than the first appearance would indicate. Glenn Daman, pastor, author and rural ministry specialist, referenced material that indicated that the small church often rates as the healthiest church.<sup>4</sup> This concept seemed hard to understand or believe, because the factors that seemed the strongest indicators of success often connect growth in numbers and the health of church finances. When churches fail to grow this presents a significant burden to overcome. Whether voiced or not, the question, ‘what is the matter with us’ tends to add pressure. The burden often lies heaviest on the pastoral leadership.

Pastoral breakthrough provided a key component for the research. Author Peter Scazzero in *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* discussed “the dark night of the soul” or what he termed ‘the Wall’ when he said, “For many, going back in order to go forward thrusts us up against the Wall. Others are brought to it by circumstances and crises beyond our control.”<sup>5</sup> Finding and documenting cases of moving beyond significant challenges to places of victory marked the research. These pastoral interviews developed out of contact with various leaders who connected me with pastors that fit the criteria of this research. Often it took numerous attempts to uncover pastors willing to participate with experiences that matched the desired framework. The

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<sup>4</sup> Glenn Daman interview with Paul Maunu, January 22, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality: It's Impossible to be Spiritually Mature While Remaining Emotionally Immature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 117.

interviews occurred through phone calls to document the key components of their church turnaround.

The research criteria necessitated experiences uncovered that included turnaround from a state of plateau or decline. This element can provide hope and encouragement to the pastor engaging in the battle to overcome the season of challenge. This research may stir the belief that growth can happen through the difficult seasons of ministry. The rural context often tends to get overlooked when celebrating the stories of success. Uncovering accounts that demonstrated the plausibility for ministry turnaround offered value. The situations discovered in this research varied in many ways; the challenges inherent in the church and local community dynamics presented unique obstacles to turnaround. This material does not provide a one size fits all approach. Principles came forth offering ideas to consider and apply to multiple rural ministry situations. After the interview process concluded, the categorization and analysis of the data took place. These commonalities offered breakthroughs and insights suggesting hope for struggling rural churches.

Separating the rural pastor from the rural church appeared difficult due to the close connection that often exists in the small communities. The rural pastor does not represent the church in all ways yet in many aspects there seems little distinction. This research will refer to the minister at times and the church at times. Many rural settings where the pastor represents the only paid staff made conclusive distinctions challenging. The church and pastor remain associated in significant ways and tend to provide a single narrative for the pastors and churches referenced. The plateau or decline and turnaround, though differing in elements from pastor to church, will retain a link in the research. Church dynamics and pastoral ministry provides

factors to consider as a whole and dividing them would represent more investigation than this research provides.

The ability to implement change might serve as the most vital component of moving from plateau and decline to turnaround. Dr. Henry Cloud in *Necessary Endings* reflected upon identifying the source of the energy for change; “If you have energy without intelligence, it will be wasted and not go toward a direction or a path. But likewise, intelligence or a plan without energy is not going anywhere at all. Even the best-laid plans will stagnate without a force driving them.”<sup>6</sup> The discovery of what motivated change proved foundational. The change factors may vary according to circumstance within the church, community, and minister’s personal life. The pastors surveyed found pathways to lead their churches from plateau or decline to growth. Some components that produced turnaround proved similar while other aspects tended to fit individual situations.

This thesis details methods used to study rural church turnaround, focusing on the context of the study, research methodology, and obtaining results from the rural context. The literature review includes biblical expression, rural ministry challenges, and valuing rural ministry. The main portion of this thesis addresses findings and analysis from the ten interviews of pastors leading turnaround, detailing; expected findings, key components, and contributing factors. The key components include spiritual fervency, productive relationships, and community outreach which form the quintessential elements from the research. These factors provide the framework for turnaround. Theological reflections on *Orthodoxy*, *Orthopraxis*, and *Orthopathos* in the rural setting garnered exploration. Applications from the research address; establishing the call to the

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Cloud, *Necessary Endings: The Employees, Business, and Relationships That All of Us Have to Give Up in Order to Move Forward* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2010), 112.

rural context, pursuing spiritual growth, initiating outreach, and establishing relationships. The methodology, literature review, findings and analysis, theological reflections, and application provide the framework for this thesis structure.

## **Research Methodology for Rural Church Turnaround**

The research format changed as this project developed. The original plan for research included a defined four-state region with a survey for all pastors ministering in a rural setting with prescribed church attendance. These factors were of interest because they relate to the ministry context familiar to my experience. Authors Bruce Berg and Howard Lune in *Qualitative Research Methods* stated, “Some ideas are interesting to think about but impractical, unethical, or even impossible to study in a rigorous fashion.”<sup>7</sup> Challenges with the format and questions to the number of surveys obtainable caused a shift in research development to occur. The change from a survey to interview offered incentive for increased depth of study.

### **Context of the Study**

The research conducted on the rural church took the form of semi-structured interviews that produced qualitative research. Professor Uwe Flick, the author of *Introducing Research Methodology*, denoted how the semi-structured interview prepares some questions but the interviewer can deviate from the questions, thus getting the interviewee’s insight on the issue.<sup>8</sup> The interview launched with 18 framework questions and further questions that arose assisted in explaining details and providing essential information. This research approach allowed information to come from the valuable experience of varied circumstances of ministry in the

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce L. Berg and Howard Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods: for the Social Sciences*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Uwe Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology: A Beginner’s Guide to Doing a Research Project* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 112.



rural setting.<sup>9</sup> The methodology of research and learning from rural pastors and churches inspired this research.<sup>10</sup> Understanding the components of successful rural ministry inspired this project. Preconceived perceptions existed when starting this research, however, pastoring in four rural communities provided some understanding, which drove my research and fueled the desire to encounter and comprehend a deeper knowledge of other pastor's impact through rural ministry.

## **Research Methodology**

This research project led to contact with either pastors or leaders in eleven states to set up interviews with pastors that fit within the scope of this study. These contacts produced a pool of ten pastors that took part in these interviews. The geographic location developed a framework for the rural context; however, the design did not afford limitations to a certain part of the United States, yet my contacts allowed access to limited locations for pastoral interviews. One minister participated in the interview who recently had transitioned out of his church. The other nine pastors interviewed still serve in the places of ministry discussed in the research. Stipulations did not consider pastoral tenure or number of churches the lead pastor served. This analysis will reference themes observed and analyzed through phone interviews with each pastor following the guideline questions and exploring other areas related to the research theme. The interviews varied in length from approximately thirty minutes to an hour and thirty minutes because some pastors needed more time to describe their circumstances and answer questions. Flick described

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<sup>9</sup> Marvin Gilbert, Alan R. Johnson, and Paul W. Lewis ed. *Missiological Research: Interdisciplinary Foundations, Methods, and Integration* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2018), 162.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert, Johnson, and Lewis ed. *Missiological Research*, 134.

qualitative research as a kind of dialogue.<sup>11</sup> The interchange between interviewer and interviewee resulted in variance with the interviews. The role of the interviewer served to find the most complete answer allowing longer time frames. A recording of the interviews did not occur, but thorough written documentation occurred throughout the interview process. Interview analysis discovered commonalities in pastors' responses. The responses to questions varied but similar answers provided categories to consider. For example, when considering the challenges of the plateau or season of decline the terms used included depression, anxiety, discouraged, and frustrated. All these responses for this study would come under the topic of discouragement.

When referencing specific details from the responses of the pastors the real names and situations of the pastors will remain confidential. Berg and Lune described assuring confidentiality by changing the real name of the interviewee with a pseudonym or case number when reporting the data.<sup>12</sup> The research evaluation referred to each pastor with an assigned letter, for example, "Pastor A described ...." Providing anonymity for the pastors surveyed offered protection concerning any sensitive issues.

The church size when these pastors began ministering in the communities varied. Seven of the churches had less than fifty people in attendance on their Sunday service, two churches had an attendance of seventy with the final church having an attendance of one hundred and thirty.<sup>13</sup> All the churches grew with the current attendance ranging from sixty-five up to two hundred fifty-three. The most significant growth occurred in a church that grew from thirty-six to two hundred fifty-three. The least significant growth occurred in a church that grew by fifteen

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<sup>11</sup> Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Berg and Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Two churches had initial attendance of seventy people each declined, one to fifty and the other to twelve before the turnaround occurred.

people. The percentage growth from the low attendance to current attendance ranged from 30 to 640 percent growth. The details offered on various topics originate from pastoral perspectives derived from the experience of leading churches through seasons of plateau and or decline in the rural context where they serve and lead.

### **Delimitations of the Research**

Some aspects of this study may provide variance according to issues that might influence the information gathered and referenced by this research. Berg and Lune referenced finding the appropriate group to interview not just the accessible ones.<sup>14</sup> These factors, which did not receive thorough investigation, had unknown impact on research results. The scope of this study could have proved too broad if further research included these elements. Many of these issues proved interesting on a personal level and warrant further consideration and research.

The states represented by the study could have impacted the outcome of this study. Texas had the most churches represented with four, Kansas had three, Nebraska, Missouri, and Illinois each had one. Roth described how rural may be characterized by multiple considerations.<sup>15</sup> The rural culture even within the same state, as western and eastern Nebraska have elements that differ. Eastern Nebraska tends to have closer location to urban centers and other communities than western Nebraska. The results may have changed if the ten interviews included rural pastors from the east coast or west coast; if the research had occurred in other states the results may have revealed further variance. These factors could have come into play yet the ability to draw from five different states and a vast geographical area gave a good perspective with breadth.

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<sup>14</sup> Berg and Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Brad Roth interview with Paul Maunu, January 22, 2020.

One factor not taken into consideration in the research concerned the age of the minister. Age may have influenced factors that related to the plateau or decline season along with turnaround. Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson in *Comeback Churches* described the median age of the pastors from their survey as forty-eight years old; they reported that of the pastors that led comebacks in their churches seventy-five percent were over forty years old.<sup>16</sup> Further study could provide research that impacted ideas of how age influences various aspects of the turnaround. For instance, did older pastors lead turnaround better or did younger pastors have superior results? Age may have given other insights, but it was beyond the scope of this study.

An element capable of producing different results could include interviewing pastors from other church denominations, which may have revealed further insights. Learning how these issues impacted pastors that operate with a different system of governance could provide stimulating consideration. Examining turnaround in Evangelical churches compared to Pentecostal churches would add insight. Discovery of key elements from research relating to other church groups may add value; however, this was outside the scope of this research.

Interviewing pastors who did not have an element of spiritual renewal in their experience could have impacted the results of the survey. Providing research that could chronicle other pastors in similar circumstances that did not experience a level of spiritual fervency yet accomplished turnaround could offer further insights. Did this issue impact the results as much as it appears to have, or did it play a less significant factor than understood through the current information may have provided important answers to these types of questions? Historian Paul Pierson stated:

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<sup>16</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 Churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 187. Kindle Edition.

While we can never dictate what the Spirit of God will do, we can seek and expect his special activity as we move out in response to His guidance. Perhaps one reason many of us do not see very much activity of the Holy Spirit is that we always play it safe. To be honest, we really do not need a lot of the power of the Spirit to run more church machinery, or even mission machinery at times. This suggests to us the importance of moving out and taking risks with confidence in the Spirit as we follow His leading....

If we are interested in mission, we must seek renewal.<sup>17</sup>

Clarity on spiritual dynamics provides value for the Pentecostal perspective. Author Steve Bierly in *How to Thrive as a Small-Church Pastor* stated, “Your schedule can often be so crowded that you neither have the time, inclination, nor energy to be alone with God.”<sup>18</sup> The ability to overcome the challenges that come with ministry seems significant. Further research on aspects of spiritual renewal could add valuable details and insight for supplementary analysis.

Interviews with pastors that resisted deepening relationships might have offered differing results. Understanding the difference between the results of those who did and those who did not develop deeper relationships could have provided additional information. Shannon Jung, an author of *Rural Ministry*, stated, “Isolation has traditionally been one of the biggest factors negatively impacting rural pastors.”<sup>19</sup> Exploring the effects of isolation from leadership and colleagues may have altered results that could have added perspective. A test group to compare various responses to relationships may produce other statistics not considered.

A focus on a certain ethnic element in the rural setting might have impacted the study. Jung described how understanding rural diversity factors provided the framework for effective

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<sup>17</sup> Paul E. Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History through a Missiological Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2009), 16, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Steve R. Bierly, *How to Thrive as a Small-Church Pastor: A Guide to Spiritual and Emotional Well-Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 30.

<sup>19</sup> Shannon Jung et al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 213.

ministry in the changing rural context.<sup>20</sup> As the rural communities change in ethnicity learning how these changes impact church may either produce ministry opportunities or limit them. Understanding ethnic communities could provide viable material to consider, yet the research did not consider these elements as it was beyond the scope of this study.

A focus on the financial status of the regions studied may have influenced the research results. Bierly referenced the challenge of finances in the small church and advised the pastor to find an advocate for assistance.<sup>21</sup> The financial status of rural communities and considerations of the economic impact on church health and growth would produce further context. Supplementary examination of these factors would influence the scope of the study. This factor might have influenced the study due to the similar economic structure of the middle of the country versus the economic factors on the coasts, which may prove beneficial.

The study of the educational background of the ministers surveyed might have produced data that could clarify rural turnaround. Educational qualifications did not enter the scope of the interviews; the minister's educational training including Bible college or received credentials through correspondence classes might have offered an area to explore. Stetzer and Dodson described what they called comeback leaders as learners who continued to read, study and grow.<sup>22</sup> Pastors referenced life factors before their ministry situation during the interviews but no attempt to understand or analyze these aspects of their experience that impacted ministry occurred, however, the research made no connections concerning educational background. Formal and non-formal education factors may have added insight into this research for educators.

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<sup>20</sup> Jung, *Rural Ministry*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Bierly, *How to Thrive as a Small-Church Pastor*, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 170.

Exploration of the credential level of the minister may have impacted elements of this study. Including the credential level of the rural pastors could have added additional insights to the research. No questions about whether the pastor held a certified, licensed or ordination credential level with the Assemblies of God entered the survey.<sup>23</sup> The ability to compare the experience concerning credentials may have provided key information for district officials to consider, however was outside the realm of research.

Each of these options for further research could add clarity or insight yet they fell outside the framework of this research. The limitations of the research prevented exploring numerous factors including those presented. Investigating these topics in the rural context would add further insights. The scope of the research presented corresponds to the thesis topic of rural church turnaround.

### **Obtaining Research Information**

The research target needed definition and focus to provide information to consider. Factors connected to personal ministry experience impacted attributes of the research. Establishing a research process compatible with the rural context and key factors to understanding rural turnaround proved vital.

### **Parameters of the Study**

The focus of the interviews provided a pathway to understand the experiences of rural pastors; thus, learning factors that might shape ministry dynamics. The research intended to provide insight into the rural context in the pastor's personal ministry setting. In *Small Town Jesus* Donnie Griggs referenced Robert Wuthnow's statement:

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<sup>23</sup> My credential process included each credential; certified minister, followed by licensed to preach and then ordained, which represents my current credential with the Assemblies of God.

Relatively little research has been devoted to small towns since the 1950s... small towns were viewed as part of a declining sector populated by fewer people, and of interest more as the location of food production and tourism than as places where people still lived. As a result, data has been available from census reports about the number, size, demographic composition, and economic characteristics of small towns, but little effort has been made to learn what residents of small towns think and believe.<sup>24</sup>

The rural setting often feels marginalized in the modern faith context. Focusing on the growing urban churches seems to consume much time and resources in studies and thought. Obtaining information to provide further insight into rural communities helped define the target group framework. The criteria for the interviews conducted of the pastors had defined attributes. These elements consisted of factors important to consider from the rural context that may provide further insights. These criteria intended to reveal attributes common to the rural church and pastor allowing for further insights.

#### *Definition of Rural*

The definition of what constitutes rural varies according to the source defining the number. Daman described rural as a population of less than ten thousand and not close to an urban center.<sup>25</sup> He further explained that other sources, such as the government, might alter that number but for this research, communities of less than ten thousand people will provide the rural context. The pastors interviewed for this research ministered in communities that ranged in population between five hundred ninety-two and four thousand three hundred people. Each community denotes the rural setting and the states represented included Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, and Texas. Each pastor interviewed considered his ministry context as rural, which fits the criteria of the rural setting.

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<sup>24</sup> Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus: Taking the Gospel Mission Seriously in Seemingly Unimportant Places* (Damascus, MD: EverTruth, 2016), loc. 106. Kindle Edition.

<sup>25</sup> Glenn Daman, interview with Paul Maunu, January 22, 2020.



### *Plateau or Decline Ministry Phase*

Before the interview, a discussion took place on factors that describe their ministry. Serving as pastor during a season of plateau or decline in worship attendance represented an essential component of their ministry experience for this study. This study required the inclusion of the sense that the church either felt stuck or movement tracked in the wrong direction. Stetzer and Dodson described plateau and decline when they said, “Typically, they start strong or experience periods of growth, but then they stagnate. Patterns and traditions that once seemed special eventually lose their meaning. Churches that were once outwardly focused eventually become worried about the wrong things.”<sup>26</sup> The progress of the church becomes compromised and momentum seems lost. The idea of a new pastor coming into a church in plateau or decline and leading them in growth did not fit the parameters of this research. Studying pastors that led churches through these challenges provided a framework to generate insight for other pastors who find themselves in a season of plateau or decline. The discovery of key factors that sustained the pastors and strengthened ministry through these seasons provided key information. The lessons learned, insights gained or methodology that provided forward momentum offered material for reflection within the rural ministry context.

### *Turnaround Ministries*

Further criteria considered the numeric growth of churches after a season of decline or plateau. Studying the pastor that led through these seasons into a time of growth within the same body of believers became the final defining characteristic. The level of numerical growth and the length of growth did not have limitations only that the church came out of either plateau or decline into a season of adding people. Further discussion about whether numerical growth

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<sup>26</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 17.

equals a healthier state in church life could add insight, but for the parameters for this study, a season of numerical growth provided an essential part of the framework for the churches studied.

### *Essential Research Prerequisites*

The pastors surveyed met these three elements; 1. lead pastor in a community of fewer than ten thousand people, 2. serving as pastor during a timeframe of plateau or decline, and 3. a season of church growth after plateau or decline. Some pastors contacted met some of the requirements, but the research prerequisites necessitated that the church met all three elements to be included in the analysis. Church growth dynamics in the urban setting though valuable failed to meet the purpose of this study; though growth principles exhibited by the urban setting may apply to any church, the scope of this research only included the rural church. The research provided insight from pastors of Assembly of God churches due to the connections stemming from pastoring an Assemblies of God church. Stetzer and Dodson reflected on a survey of Assemblies of God churches from 2004 and 2005 and reported that about two-thirds of the churches were in plateau or decline.<sup>27</sup> This research did not exclude other denominations, but the focus group remained within the Assemblies of God.

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<sup>27</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 25.

## Literature Review

The literature review developed three sections. The biblical expression of ministry in the rural context forms the first section. The challenges that rural ministry present described the second section. The third section included valuing rural ministry. Additional literature review components were included in the research methodology section.

### Biblical Expression

Roth described in *God's Country* how Jesus loves the rural church and reveals His commitment to people of all places.<sup>28</sup> This understanding drives the desire to strengthen the posture of the rural congregation. The love of Jesus for people appears in every place whether a metropolitan center or small village in the out of the way places. The commitment of Jesus to people applies to rural churches and rural pastors. Tim Chester and Steve Timmis in *Total Church* revealed how God has a mission and the church shares His mission.<sup>29</sup> The mission of God encompasses the people that reside in the small communities motivating the willingness of rural pastors to present the gospel and serve in this capacity. The key component of spiritual fervency discovered through the research revealed the importance of developing passion for God and His mission. The pastors that took part in the research represented this commitment to mission.

Rural communities with a population decline may carry the identity of loss as part of their mentality. Jung referenced the Christian hope modeled through the rural church becoming

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<sup>28</sup> Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), loc. 132. Kindle Edition.

<sup>29</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 105. Kindle Edition.

a revelation of “God’s power made perfect through weakness” to the places where a lack of hope can exist.<sup>30</sup> Bringing a revelation of the value that God carries towards the downtrodden speaks into the heart of the hurting. Edwin Earp in his classic work *The Rural Church* detailed this request, “I feel that someone ought to state at this conference the great importance of the leading agencies in the denominations arranging themselves so as to serve the needs of the country churches.”<sup>31</sup> The dynamics of both church and communities have changed over the last century but the opportunity to serve rural towns and establish hope remains strong. Daman referenced a renewed interest in the rural context.<sup>32</sup> Pentecostal theologian, Amos Young attributed the empowerment of the Spirit to reveal a powerful witness of the full gospel through proclamation coupled with action.<sup>33</sup> Rural communities offer a valuable place to reveal the love of God and the power of God through declaration and demonstration. The Pentecostal church can minister to the heart and mind of the individuals in the rural harvest field in a Holy Spirit empowered manner.

### **Rural Ministry Challenges**

Rural pastoral leadership may present some specific challenges. The rise in rural poverty has led to extra stress, alcoholism, depression, and abuse in rural communities followed by additional challenges in the rural churches.<sup>34</sup> Authors Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas in *Hollowing Out the Middle* described the phenomenon when young people pursuing higher

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<sup>30</sup> Jung, *Rural Ministry*, 20. 2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV.

<sup>31</sup> Edwin L. Earp, *The Rural Church: Serving the Community* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1918), 70.

<sup>32</sup> Glenn Daman interview with Paul Maunu, January 22, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Amos Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 190.

<sup>34</sup> Jung, *Rural Ministry*, 114.

education leave for larger population centers, producing a brain drain in the rural context.<sup>35</sup> This can create an issue when the best and brightest no longer benefit the community but take their talents elsewhere. Losing people can impact church dynamics as students that represent potential church members with energy and gifts moved away. The next generation of potential church members represents a smaller pool due to this demographic shift. As individuals leave for urban areas, the result leads to internal community struggle with negativity over this loss. Carr and Kefalas stated “Given that young people are now rural America’s most precious declining resource, it seems that the best way to preserve the nation’s small towns will be to create new sorts of conservation efforts to invest more efficiently in these young people, whose futures – as parents, workers, homeowners, voters, and taxpayers – will be so critical to the countryside’s survival.”<sup>36</sup> This aspect of the challenges to rural communities impacts the potential to raise leaders and ministry partners within the church family. Griggs believed that like the mainstream culture, Christians tend to believe the city represents the place where God wants them and where God tends to move.<sup>37</sup> This mentality increases the difficulty to ascribe value to the rural context; overcoming stereotypes and misconceptions need consideration. Battling culture along with notions from within the community of faith feels like fighting on two fronts. The relationship dynamic provided a key component of research this research. Friendship from outside and inside the church offered incentive to overcome challenges to ministry.

The capacity to have a voice in the rural context proves challenging. Robert Lewis illustrated a growing sense of the church losing its voice in our society and how only one in three

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2009), 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Carr and Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, loc. 133.

pastors believed the church makes a positive impact on culture.<sup>38</sup> Opposition to ministry can occur from people in the community and even from people in the church that resist change. New ministers tend to receive apprehensive treatment requiring time for observation from the community leading to initial limitations of ministry. The positive factor of a rural minister receiving a voice within the community includes a larger impact than often occurs in a larger city. Lewis stated, “I believe a fitting description of the church would be this: a community of people who stand firm in the truth over time against raging currents of opposition and who present living proof of a loving God to a watching world.”<sup>39</sup> The rural community observation of pastors and church members provides both a challenge and opportunity to represent Jesus well. Keeping from growing weary proves challenging for rural pastors. Daman reflected on the transition from loving ministry to seeing ministry as a task and obligation.<sup>40</sup> When challenges come, the methods the minister utilizes can establish or hinder credibility, impacting the church and avoiding the tendency to become jaded or operate out of hurt.

### **Valuing Rural Ministry**

Jesus valued the small places in His ministry; the church too can recognize the importance of rural. Griggs stated “Simply put, Jesus was from a small town, so for Christians to not love small towns is, at the very least concerning.”<sup>41</sup> Wherever people live, the opportunity to minister to them and love them connects Christians with the mission of Christ. Pentecostal

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis and Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, 41.

<sup>40</sup> Glenn Daman, *When Shepherds Weep: Finding Tears of Joy for Wounded Pastors* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), loc. 2322-2327. Kindle Edition.

<sup>41</sup> Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, loc. 312.

educator and author Carolyn Tennant, stated in *Catch the Wind of the Spirit*, “the more we open the eyes of the church to special concerns around us, the greater will be the flow of God’s sending current.”<sup>42</sup> The belief that God desires to minister in the rural context, and remains willing to partner with people to impact small communities seems foundational. Rural ministry may at times feel like forgotten ministry by our culture, but not by God. The enticement of moving on to a bigger and better ministry context can prove difficult to process well. Treating small town ministry with value seems foundational.

A belief that a call to the rural context represents a high calling from the Lord needs consideration. Author, missiologist, and former Assemblies of God World Missions Director, J. Philip Hogan in *All the Gospel to All the World* stated, “It has been the glory of the Christian Church that she has gone to regions where no one else has dared or desired to go.”<sup>43</sup> The rural place of ministry can seem less desirable than more known and celebrated places, yet God cares about the small places. The value of the call to ministry should not become characterized by the number of people in the community or the number of people in the church. The honor of serving the Lord represents a key aspect of the heart of service to the Lord. Daman explained “To maintain our perspective in the midst of the trials of ministry, we must recognize that not only is life a gift from God, but ministry itself is a gift God has given us to enjoy.”<sup>44</sup> Ministry in the rural place should bring gratification despite the accompanying challenges. When challenges become more of the focus than the joy of ministry; pastoral ministry may prove less effective.

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<sup>42</sup> Carolyn Tennant, *Catch the Wind of the Spirit: How the 5 Ministry Gifts Can Transform Your Church* (Springfield, MO: Vital Resources, 2016), loc. 2134. Kindle Edition.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Lewis, *All the Gospel to All the World: 100 Years of Assemblies of God Missiology* (Springfield, MO: Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2014), loc. 1222. Kindle Edition.

<sup>44</sup> Daman, *When Shepherds Weep*, loc. 2335.

George Hunter III, in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, recounted how Saint Patrick escaped slavery then sensed a call from the Lord to go back and serve the people of Ireland.<sup>45</sup> The willingness and desire to bring the gospel message to people who needed to hear about Jesus positioned Patrick for effective ministry; embracing the opportunity over the challenges proved advantageous. Community outreach offered a key component in turnaround ministry. The willingness to embrace the community through creative ideas brought impact. Caring for people in rural towns that need to know about Jesus exemplifies ministry in small places.

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<sup>45</sup> George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 1-3. Kindle Edition.



## **Findings and Analysis**

The journey of the pastors surveyed demonstrated spiritual fervency, relationship factors, and outreach activities strengthened rural ministry to overcome the challenges that hindered marked growth. Each account included challenges that might have taken the church on a course that could have damaged the minister and the church. Battling through the discouraging times became key. These accounts offered much to celebrate.

### **Expected Findings**

As the scope of this study developed, the challenge of approaching these interviews without preconceived ideas or anticipated answers proved difficult. Pastoring close to twenty years in the rural context and the Master of Arts in Rural Ministry program of study at Trinity Bible College and Graduate School impacted perspective of what factors might emerge from this research. Some of the expected findings seemed relevant to the framework of the study. Stetzer and Dodson stated, “Attitudes were one of the top challenges these comeback churches faced in regard to being revitalized.”<sup>46</sup> Discouragement during the season of plateau or decline proved a significant obstacle to overcome. Each of the pastors interviewed revealed different factors relating to discouragement that connected to the plateau or decline or stages. Other issues did not carry as much weight as expected. The weight of some issues seemed relevant to consider regarding this survey.

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<sup>46</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 133.

## Programs

Programs played a role in this process but the weight of programs as a significant difference-maker contributed less than expected. Pastor H referred to trying programs that a church consultant recommended with little success.<sup>47</sup> The idea that a program held the key to bringing about a turnaround for the church did not come through in the interviews. Discipleship specialist, Bill Hull in *Choose the Life*, remarked, “I have concluded that discipleship or spiritual formation is the primary and exclusive work of the church.”<sup>48</sup> The process of discipleship often includes a format or program, yet the spiritual formation represents the goal. Programs provided value and proved helpful in the context of offering a tool to consider.

One aspect from the research revealed how something that worked in one setting may not work in the same way in another. Finding what fits right in their setting provided some structure to ministry expression for their church. The idea that others pushed programs intending to help did not always aid or encourage. Pastor G revealed how things that worked in a previous setting did not work the same at his current location due to a different mentality of the people of the community.<sup>49</sup> Going to conferences that explained how to fix their church at times seemed counterproductive and led to discouragement. Pastor A reflected upon the dilemma when programs do not work out well the question may point towards a pastoral issue.<sup>50</sup> Providing programs as an option to consider seemed productive while offering them as a quick fix did not prove beneficial.

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<sup>47</sup> Pastor H interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Bill Hull, *Choose the Life: Exploring a Faith That Embraces Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 29. Kindle Edition.

<sup>49</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.

## Leadership

The level of importance of leadership in these accounts of turnaround proved different than my perception going into the interviews. John Maxwell's adage that "Everything rises and falls on leadership," may have some merits, but did not seem as significant as expected.<sup>51</sup> The accounts shared did not diminish the importance of leadership but seemed less significant than other factors that came out of the interviews. The pastors interviewed referenced components of leadership in the turnaround, but it played a secondary type role. Daman in his book *Leading the Small Church* described spiritual leadership in the context of leadership influenced by the cultural setting of the church and the expectations of people.<sup>52</sup> He relayed how understanding the culture allows the pastor to lead within that context. Anderson and Mylander in *Extreme Church Makeover* say, "Leadership is a function of the leader, the follower and the situation. Just because a pastor does well in one situation does not guarantee he or she will do well in another."<sup>53</sup> The idea that leadership varies according to extenuating circumstances revealed valuable aspects to consider. Pastor G recounted how previous ministry turnarounds happened easily, but the current setting proved slower and more challenging.<sup>54</sup> Within the rural context, each ministry situation varies; these settings have distinct dynamics that need consideration when leading.

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<sup>51</sup> John C. Maxwell, *Becoming a Person of Influence: How to Positively Impact the Lives of Others* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 134. Kindle Edition.

<sup>52</sup> Glenn C. Daman, *Leading the Small Church: How to Develop a Transformational Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 212.

<sup>53</sup> Neil T. Anderson and Charles Mylander, *Extreme Church Makeover: A Biblical Plan to Help Your Church Achieve Unity and Freedom in Christ* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2005), 94.

<sup>54</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

Leadership held a level of importance; 60 percent of the pastors evidenced growing in leadership during the challenging season of ministry. The growth through challenges revealed components of leadership. Robert Clinton in *The Making of a Leader* described the internal leadership growth phase through testing followed by ministry expansion.<sup>55</sup> Leading themselves to adjust and grow through discouraging times portrays elements of maturity. Shannon O'Dell in *Transforming Church in Rural America* explained "Leadership is ... resisting the urge to settle."<sup>56</sup> The willingness to overcome the desire to settle reveals a maturity within the leader. A time frame of plateau or decline could imply leadership challenges with the church leader. Coaching expert Tony Stoltzfus in *The Calling Journey* stated, "God uses major adversity or failure to shape us, and we struggle and kick against those pricks to our ego. Eventually, we discover how much we are depending on our own strength and how deeply we need God."<sup>57</sup> Overcoming these difficult situations proved important. The questions of whether the pastor represented the problem, presented a challenge for numerous of the pastors to consider and get beyond. Leading when church members or fellow ministers might question leadership ability also provided an opportunity to grow in leadership. Leadership played a key role, but not as important as expected before the interviews began. The ability to grow in leadership skills seemed important for turnaround.

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<sup>55</sup> J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2012), loc. 956. Kindle Edition.

<sup>56</sup> Shannon O'Dell, *Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking All the Rurals* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2010), 88.

<sup>57</sup> Tony Stoltzfus, *The Calling Journey: Mapping the Stages of a Leader's Life Call* (Redding, CA: Coach 22 Bookstore, 2010), 20.

## **Pulpit Ministry**

The ministry style of the pastors did not factor in the turnaround of these churches. No pastor depicted their preaching style as a positive or negative component. Neither did any describe growing in their pulpit ministry or preaching style. Clinton stated, “God teaches an emerging leader to hear His Word for personal guidance. This is a natural stepping-stone for hearing God’s Word for corporate guidance.”<sup>58</sup> Growing in leadership tends to impact factors of ministry; pulpit ministry could have led to growth, yet no direct reference applied. The ability to communicate and minister might play important roles in church life, but those factors did not seem to impact the outcome of change.

Developing a stronger evangelistic approach did not show up in the interviews. Some comments about legalism and doing all the right things presented issues that pastors battled against for growth. The general sense seemed to point to less focus on the worship service as the church shifted towards community focus. Two pastors described changes in worship style and format which impacted their setting. Five pastors described remodeling the church building as playing a role in the turnaround process. Worship style and building factors impacted church dynamics but the pulpit ministry did not play a significant role in church growth.

## **Other Challenges**

The interviews pointed towards some factors of importance concerning facilities but more as secondary factors. Some churches went through building projects both after growth and during growth seasons. The issues that come with remodeling or building facilities may have impacted parts of church life, but they did not carry significant weight in explaining the shift from the plateau to growth. Growth did seem to drive the building issue even leading a church to

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<sup>58</sup> Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, loc. 925.

build a new building. Other churches have started capital campaigns with plans to build in the future. Changes to the facilities did not seem to procure turnaround or produce growth on a level expected.

Financial challenges occurred as a factor but not in a manner that seemed to produce or hinder turnaround. Some pastors revealed having to work other jobs to make ends meet, but this did not tend to impact the plateau or decline season. The stress factors of dealing with financial challenges presented hardships. Pastor D described people manipulating finances to starve the pastor out.<sup>59</sup> Some referenced the unhealthy giving pattern of people and challenges with board relations included finances. Pastor G referred to a mentality of the church board keeping the pastor poor thus keeping the pastor humble.<sup>60</sup> Financial issues provided minimal impact on the turnaround.

The above factors that some conferences and other resources give as solutions for church turnaround influenced church growth below expectations. Leadership seemed influential but not in an expected manner. Programs did seem to represent tools that proved helpful but did not represent a silver bullet type solution. Facilities and finances played secondary factors. Pulpit ministry may have had an impact, but the interviews did not provide material considered significant in turnaround. Further studied into these issues may have provided additional insights, but this research came from the pastor's descriptions of their experiences with plateau and turnaround.

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<sup>59</sup> Pastor D interview with Paul Maunu, February 17, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

The following three sections indicate commonalities from those interviewed and developed into the key components of the study. These factors influenced turnaround to the greatest degree.

## **Key Components**

The interviews chronicled three key factors referenced by each of the ten pastors; spiritual fervency, productive relationships, and community outreach. Prayer, spiritual encounters, and times of refreshment contributed to spiritual fervency. Intentional investment, friendship among peers, and deepened relations with leadership impacted productive relationships. Mentality shift, servanthood, and catalytic ideas encompassed community outreach (see chart in Appendix 1).

### **Spiritual Fervency**

A broad component that each rural minister referenced in some capacity dealt with a spiritual fervency. The stirring of the Lord in the heart of the minister played a significant role in the process of growth. The descriptions associated with this factor looked different and the time frame of when and how they came about also varied. The inspiring aspect concerned the pastor in the challenging situation embracing spiritual encounters leading to renewed strength and encouragement from the Lord. Of the factors that surfaced through the interviews, this seemed the most important factor for the pastors.

#### *Prayer*

The common response from the pastors concerned a deepening of their prayer life connected with increased prayer by the church. The expectation of prayer playing a significant role seems probable but the way it came across in a meaningful manner gave strength to its importance. Asbury Professor of Evangelism, Ron Crandall, in *Turn Around Strategies for the*

*Small Church*, described prayer as the channel for personal and corporate renewal, adding it further contributes to conceptual and missiological renewal.<sup>61</sup> Christians believe that prayer plays a significant role in a turnaround and their stories of this increased spiritual fervency proved inspiring. Tony and Felicity Dale along with George Barna in *Small is Big*, stated, “We cannot expect a move of God to come cheaply; we must be a people who are willing to pay the price.”<sup>62</sup> Prayer represents a price that the church commits to establishing God’s move in an area. A sense of spiritual superiority did not describe these stories, but the opposite proved true, pastors and church leaders struggled to find answers to challenges, so they prayed. Prayer seemed to break patterns of control, give creative ideas for the church to embrace, and bind the church together.

The link of God partnering with the pastors and churches connected the common denominator of prayer. The church that experienced the most growth also presented the greatest details of focused points of prayer. Pentecostal educator and author Gary Tyra in *The Holy Spirit in Mission* wrote, “Local church leaders can encourage church members to routinely gather for prayer with other like-minded believers eager to experience ongoing empowerment from the Holy Spirit to live missionally faithful lives for Christ.”<sup>63</sup> The Holy Spirit worked through congregations as they prayed. The times of prayer appeared to position the pastor and church to hear from the Lord and carry out the mandate in the community. Some of the descriptions of prayer seemed simple however, it made a significant impact on the church. Pentecostal

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<sup>61</sup> Ron Crandall, *Turn Around Strategies for the Small Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 48.

<sup>62</sup> Tony Dale, Felicity Dale, and George Barna, *Small is Big: Unleashing the Big Impact of Intentionally Small Churches* (Brentwood, TN: Barna, 2011), 65.

<sup>63</sup> Gary Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission: Prophetic Speech and Action in Christian Witness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), loc. 1792. Kindle Edition.



missiologist Denzil Miller in *Mobilizing for Mission* says, “Devoted intercession is the spark that ignites the fires of revival.”<sup>64</sup> Bringing rural communities before the Lord through intercession impacts effectiveness. The strengthening of the pastor and church through prayer may represent the single most effective means to get beyond decline or plateau.

### *Spiritual Encounter*

Increased spiritual fervency further connected to the renewal through reflection upon the call toward ministry from the Lord. Numerous pastors expressed returning to the call from the Lord to their place of ministry during challenging seasons. Considering leaving for another church or community entered the equation for a few of the ministers surveyed, yet seeking the Lord tended to restore the sense of calling and sustained them through these challenges. The description of an intentional pursuit of the Lord reinforced the sense of doing the will of the Lord for their lives. Feeling commissioned for the place of ministry would apply to every place but the dynamics of rural ministry make this factor quite important. Isolation presented a significant challenge to the rural pastor; yet, partnership with the Lord seemed to make a difference.

Fresh revelation from the Lord impacted turnaround in these ministries. The settings of these encounters with the Lord seemed to vary. Pastor B relayed hearing from the Lord during worship in a difficult moment that brought a perspective that impacted ministry.<sup>65</sup> Other places of encounter included conferences where the Lord impacted them through a fresh Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The Biblical narrative states, “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to

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<sup>64</sup> Denzil R. Miller, *Mobilizing for Mission: 12 Lessons on Spirit-Empowered Missions* (Springfield, MO: AIA Publications, 2019), 50.

<sup>65</sup> Pastor B interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

“speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).<sup>66</sup> This passage described Peter and John and the believers being filled or in some cases refilled with the Spirit for empowerment for service. Finding venues to promote renewed vitality in their relationship with the Lord provided needed encouragement and strengthened ministry. Receiving spiritual refreshment appeared essential in the Biblical narrative and the pastors interviewed.

### *Refreshment*

The intentional commitment to disengage from the ministry to connect with the Lord represented components of rest and renewal. Some pastors outlined making a determined decision to attend conferences or meetings to receive spiritual ministry from others that might give a fresh perspective. The investment of time and money for renewal represented value. Recognizing the effect of leading through seasons of plateau or decline and making time to seek the Lord came to play an important role in the turnaround.

Deliberate time to disengage from ministry offered refreshment and encouragement which seemed to make a strong impact on the turnaround that occurred. Pastor A referenced the need to take a Sabbatical as a component of refreshment and renewal.<sup>67</sup> Finding encouragement and spiritual renewal during this season played a key role in the church growth. Pastor I told of the difficult situation in which the decision to close the church for a season needed to occur.<sup>68</sup> This allowed the pastor to receive ministry from another church during that season of life and ministry as they entered a parent affiliated church relationship with a neighboring congregation.

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<sup>66</sup> Acts 4:31, ESV.

<sup>67</sup> Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Pastor I interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

Finding avenues to increase spiritual fervency through prayer, encounters, and times of refreshment led to ministry growth.

### **Productive Relationships**

The significance of the relationship portion of the study may have provided the most significant consideration to explore. While this issue looked like an outlying factor before the interviews, the amount of influence that friendship and partnership played in the turnaround stories provided significant inspiration. As spiritual fervency made a significant impact on the spirit, the deepening relationship seemed to give oxygen to the soul and positioned the minister to engage well in the battle. The value of these relationships proved hard to compare to spiritual elements as the differences exhibited in various ways, yet the impact played a major role in the turnaround

#### *Intentional Investment*

The respondents relayed different ways that others helped them in moments of struggle. Taking the time and effort to invest in these pastors impacted the outcome of their ministry experience. Most pastors reported positive stories of how the district officials offered help and encouragement.<sup>69</sup> Additional individuals such as Kent Anderson with Rural Compassion provided elements of help and encouragement. Pastor C denoted an encouraging message from a ministry leader that provided great encouragement in a crucial time frame.<sup>70</sup> The interviews observed outside individuals that offered components of partnership as positive and beneficial.

The investment did not just represent encouragement but also provided ideas and tools to provide a way forward. The ability to dream and expand their horizon offered another aspect of

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<sup>69</sup> This did not happen in every situation but appeared to represent the norm.

<sup>70</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

the ideas presented. The creativity that flowed out of fresh ideas came from someone outside of their context. The interaction with the pastors did not reveal a process based on programs, processes, or activities that pastors accomplished to produce growth, rather encouraged collaboration as a safe place to explore creative ways to impact the community and encourage the church. Partnership in the rural setting produced a great impact.

### *Friendship among Peers*

The relational connection to others for many of the pastors tended to play a significant role in the growth process. The research demonstrated that friendship rather than isolation provided encouragement and support. Pastor G detailed how ministry in the rural context can feel isolated and emphasized the importance of getting beyond isolation as key.<sup>71</sup> Some of the descriptions of friendships included spouses but the typical portrayal included friends in the ministry. Having fellow ministers to encourage and support them in the challenging times proved a real game-changer.

The interviews demonstrated the strong importance of giving and receiving friendships. Pastor D detailed a challenging time of discouragement when another pastor inquired about, “How things were going?” In response to the challenges the colleague did not offer any type of assistance beyond listening and a handshake.<sup>72</sup> He described the internal transformation that led to the desire to help those that might find themselves a similar point of struggle. The idea of extending friendship came out of the importance of friendship offered to each research participant from others. Relationships outside of the church context provided a significant impact to the pastor consequently the church.

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<sup>71</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Pastor D interview with Paul Maunu, February 17, 2020.

### *Deepened Relations with Leadership*

Challenges in the church revealed aspects of their experience but finding those who would partner with them in the turnaround played a key role. The idea of these pastors isolating themselves during trying times did not harmonize with their story. The interviews demonstrated the pastors' intentional actions to utilize other gifts to assist them towards church growth and health. Pastor I, who closed his church for a season, took time to develop leaders to partner with him when the church reopened.<sup>73</sup> Numerous pastors detailed how prayer became part of the dynamic relationship with leadership and that hearing from the Lord together played a significant role in growth. Pastor F discussed focused prayer times unifying church board members and staff to ask the Lord to send people that needed love and ministry.<sup>74</sup> Church growth occurred as leadership sought the Lord together.

Difficult situations developed when the leadership including board members vacated for reasons associated with challenges. Pastor J recalled when the entire board left at one time along with most of the church.<sup>75</sup> The church dropped from an attendance of close to fifty to twelve in one day. Finding people to stand with the pastor proved critical at that stage of decline. The inspiring part of the story included how the people rallied around the discouraged minister offering encouragement that led to the turnaround accompanied by significant church growth. Crandall observed that most material written to the small church has described relational skills as the most important factor, comparing the small church to a tribe or even family.<sup>76</sup> The

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<sup>73</sup> Pastor I interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Pastor F interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Pastor J interview with Paul Maunu, February 18, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Crandall, *Turn Around Strategies for the Small Church*, 29.

interviews supported this assessment as growing relationships played vital roles in the turnaround.

Relationships both inside and outside the church impacted turnaround. The elements of relationship dynamics reported by these interviews revealed facets of partnership from those outside the church offering fresh ideas and extending support. The impact of friends who came alongside during the plateau or decline epoch may prove difficult to assess the significance in an accurate manner. The internal leadership impact of others investing in ministry also seemed significant. Relationships from various sources made key contributions to church turnaround.

### **Community Outreach**

Most of the pastors categorized their churches as inward focused during the plateau or decline stage of church life. Making the transition to outward focus looked different in the various locations. Hull noted “Evangelism should begin with friendship, which is usually built around common interests; you just happen to click with a person.”<sup>77</sup> The pursuit of friendship with the community through shared interests changes avenues of outreach. All the churches referenced change in outreach as a part of the process that led to the turnaround. This process marked the minister on a personal level and an element marked the church. Pastor E highlighted a church outreach that led to a couple hurt by the church in the past coming back to the Lord and becoming baptized.<sup>78</sup> The shift from an inward focus to looking outside the walls of the church proved helpful. Pastor C relayed how he joined the fire department in his community, which

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<sup>77</sup> Hull, *Choose the Life*, 41.

<sup>78</sup> Pastor E interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

opened avenues for ministry.<sup>79</sup> Combining these elements of personal involvement and corporate church involvement impacted community involvement for the rural church.

### *Mentality Shift*

The idea of willingness to make mistakes while pursuing ministry opportunities brought a level of freedom to attempt great things for the Lord. Author Kennon Callahan in *Small Strong Congregations*, recounted churches that give positive recognition for excellent mistakes.<sup>80</sup> The pastors revealed a mental shift that created an atmosphere for bold attempts to reach out to the community. The outreach format did not seem as significant as the reason behind it. Pastor C characterized community outreach as taking longer and requiring more work than church growth material suggests.<sup>81</sup> The pastors depicted attempted activities that failed or resembled failure in some way. In retrospect, the failure almost became something to remember in a fond manner. No one celebrated the failure, but the willingness to take a bold risk created an atmosphere to attempt great endeavors to grow the church.

The description of the church feeling stuck inside the four walls revealed a component of the plateau season. Pastor J encouraged other pastors to change the philosophy of waiting for people within the church walls by instead going and meeting them outside the traditional church context.<sup>82</sup> During some situations, the outreach attempts proved beneficial with new people coming to church for events. Most did not initially bring new people into the church. Pastor E did not evaluate the outreach attempts by how many new people came to church rather by new

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<sup>79</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Kennon L. Callahan, *Small Strong Congregations: Creating Strengths and Health for Your Congregation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 210.

<sup>81</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>82</sup> Pastor J interview with Paul Maunu, February 18, 2020.

relationships developed within the community.<sup>83</sup> The compassion towards the community, linking care with action, confirmed the importance of outreach as a factor to consider.

### *Servanthood*

The shift from considering community benefiting the church to the church assisting the community revealed a deepened level of servanthood. Becoming a friend of their town tended to shift the attitude of people within the town towards the church. In his classic work *Celebration of Disciple*, Richard Foster stated “To stress the inward nature of service, however, is not enough. Service to be service must take form and shape in the world in which we live. Therefore, we must seek to perceive what service looks like in the marketplace of our daily lives.”<sup>84</sup> Discovering avenues to serve their communities played a key role in the transformation of the relationship of the church with the community. Pastor F expressed how his church had a bad reputation from past events and serving their town began to change the perspective of the people the church touched.<sup>85</sup> Overcoming obstacles through acts of service helped churches move forward.

The outreach changes encouraged community people to visit the church and make it their church home. Pastor F told of an outreach event that led a couple to ask how they could join the church.<sup>86</sup> The compassionate outreach impacted this couple, so they wanted to become part of the church. The servant mindset in the rural context redefines how the community views the

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<sup>83</sup> Pastor E interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1998), 134.

<sup>85</sup> Pastor F interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Pastor F interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.



church. The transition from considering the church as taker to a giver made a strong impact in these communities.

### *Catalytic Ideas*

The pastors that worked with Rural Compassion seemed to gain inspiration from the presentation and developed outreach events. Kent Anderson and others provided ideas and motivational material that pastors, and leadership used to attempt new things in their towns. Pastors adjusted material according to the context of their community. Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson in *The Externally Focused Church* encouraged churches to ask their community which challenges need the churches attention.<sup>87</sup> This provides ministry avenues for “felt needs” of the community; giving the church respect in their rural context. Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird in *Viral Churches* recounted a couple going into a neighborhood with these elements: the Gospel message, a passion for people, and the willingness to abandon known methods to make the message relevant.<sup>88</sup> The movement outside the walls of the church contributed to the success of meaningful engagement of the community, furthering successful ministry.

Outreach ideas featured another component, hearing the Lord’s direction for the assignment. A consideration that emerged from the interviews, observed the shift from outreach for outreach sake to answering whether the Lord directed in a certain way. The empowerment of the Spirit did not come across as prominent in the interviews but discernment about the direction from the Lord played an important role. Pastor B discussed trusting that the Lord has a plan and

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<sup>87</sup> Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), 158.

<sup>88</sup> Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches: Helping Church Planters Become Movement Makers* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 13. Kindle Edition.

empowering the church members to reach out to the community.<sup>89</sup> Miller in his book *The 1:8 Promise of Jesus* wrote, “We must begin to move in confident obedience to the Great Commission and to the inner promptings of the Spirit and start telling our friends, neighbors, and workmates about Jesus.”<sup>90</sup> Developing Holy Spirit empowered avenues of outreach contributes to gospel advancement. Author Loren Mead in *More Than Numbers* revealed that all churches have the potential for growth and those that neglect this potential will undercut their ability to grow.<sup>91</sup> Taking the step to move into the community can impact the dynamic of church growth and increased influence. The outreach events represented part of each story with elements of a mindset shift, servanthood, and ideas that fit their rural context.

### **Contributing Factors**

Some important factors surfaced during the interviews only relating to select pastors. These issues carried influence in one church yet did not appear influential in other churches. The factors referenced gives insight into contributing aspects relating to why the church experienced plateau or decline and how the turnaround occurred. Not every issue discussed during the interviews will warrant attention through the scope of this study but themes that did carry weight with some pastors and churches provide topics for discussion. Why churches came to a place of plateau or decline and how they gained a breakthrough to move beyond that position could differ according to numerous factors. Much attention and detail needed to focus on the churches

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<sup>89</sup> Pastor B interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Denzil R. Miller, *The 1:8 Promise of Jesus: The Key to World Harvest* (Springfield, MO: PneumaLife Publications, 2012), 56-57.

<sup>91</sup> Loren B. Mead, *More Than Numbers: The Ways Churches Grow* (New York, NY: Alban Institute Publications, 1993), 89.

universal areas found in the research commonalities. These attributes appeared instrumental in certain settings which may warrant consideration.

### **Shifting the Measure of Success**

A redefinition of what successful ministry looked like in their context contributed to the turnaround in fifty percent of the churches represented. Daman stated “Pastors of small churches often wonder whether their churches would grow if they worked harder, prayed more, were more skillful in ministry, or if their congregations were more open to new ideas. But the reason why pastors struggle in small churches and often become discouraged is not because of their work ethic or the inherent nature of small churches, or because their congregations are unwilling to change; it’s because they have an inadequate view of what constitutes successful leadership.”<sup>92</sup> Daman further added that pastors often no longer get evaluated by the content of their sermons or their Christian character but by accomplishments and achievements, often emphasizing organizational growth.<sup>93</sup> Pastor B detailed the shift from valuing numbers to valuing obedience and the dynamic of placing numerical results in the Lord’s hands as a form of trust.<sup>94</sup> Allowing that deep level shift in evaluation to happen may present challenges but also allows the opportunity for encouragement from the Lord instead of from performance metrics. Pastor A explained that pastors should not press in the plateau season as that can result in driving the church but should seek the Lord for adjustments both on a personal and church level.<sup>95</sup> Feeling

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<sup>92</sup> Daman, *Leading the Small Church*, 26.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>94</sup> Pastor B interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>95</sup> Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.

the need to press might include trying to make something happen in our humanity instead of a continuing partnership with God. Making the right adjustments in those seasons seemed vital.

The rural context warrants examination of the factors of success. Pastor C expressed a philosophy change that he experienced, which led to taking the first three years of ministry to develop relationships within the church and with members of the community.<sup>96</sup> This shift of philosophy came from a call to a rural ministry setting, which allowed the freedom to make changes that impacted ministry and outreaches in the community. Pastor E referenced how ministry outside the pulpit took on a greater level of significance; valuable ‘one on one’ ministry and conversations outside the church became a focal point.<sup>97</sup> Dr. George Wood the former General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, in *Core Values* stated, “If ministry doesn’t flow out of relationship, ministry is not going to happen.”<sup>98</sup> Investment in lives both within the church and outside the church whether producing growth in the immediate positions the church for Kingdom expansion in the future. Commitment to seek the Lord and focus on faithfulness to both His ways and plans could represent a measure of success even in the decline or plateau season.

### **Change Factor (postponing change prolonged plateau)**

A component of pastoral leadership that impacted turnaround dealt with change within the church. Four pastors referenced change as a factor concerning plateau and turnaround. The theme of limiting change appeared connected with not wanting to cause discord. Pastor H recounted the challenge of making changes with the founding pastor and his family still part of

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<sup>96</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Pastor E interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>98</sup> George O. Wood, *Core Values: Serving Christ’s Cause with Effectiveness and Excellence* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007), 48.

the church.<sup>99</sup> The struggle to move the church forward while honoring the past may present challenges. Making changes might place the church members in a difficult situation if former leadership seems opposed to the new direction. This process could lead to people leaving the church or dissatisfaction with leadership.

The lack of change may prolong a season of the plateau, yet instituting change can lead to an immediate decline while at the same time positioning the church for growth. Pastor C described investing in relationships before initiating change and the relationships helped overcome potential fallout.<sup>100</sup> The knowledge of what needs to change and how to incorporate change can present challenges. Pastor G revealed how the former pastor died of cancer eight months after he became pastor and how the challenges to change brought him to a place where he loved people more than he loved change.<sup>101</sup> Balancing the internal change dynamics within a church with the impact it may have on people outside the church reveals the intentions behind the reason for change. The desire for community people to experience life in Christ inspires and motivates changes within the church. J. Robert Clinton in *The Making of a Leader*, stated, “A leader who wishes to have long-term influence will need to learn how to implement change.”<sup>102</sup> Implementing change might prove challenging yet vital for a turnaround in rural churches. To move beyond plateau and decline often some factors need to change.

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<sup>99</sup> Pastor H interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>100</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.

<sup>102</sup> J. R. Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2012), loc. 1172. Kindle Edition.

## Patience in Commitment

Five of the ten pastors surveyed depicted a form of patience and long-term commitment as factors in church growth. Pastor A remembered trying to create momentum that did not come from the Lord but learned the value of rest in the Lord, trusting that He would work in His time.<sup>103</sup> Learning the art of patience in ministry tended to help pastors overcome the pressures that ministry can place upon ministers. Pastor C expressed how his phlegmatic personality suited his community and provided an opportunity to connect well within his ministry context.<sup>104</sup> Some rural factors will vary from community to community and grasping them seems helpful. Daman in *Shepherding the Small Church* ascribed effectiveness to the development of a philosophy and approach to ministry unique to the church setting.<sup>105</sup> Patience in the rural context may lead to effective ministry.

A long-term commitment may lead to increased impact over an extended period. Pastor H discussed struggling with the idea of pastors using the rural church as a steppingstone; instead, he committed to staying in his place of ministry until the Lord finishes with him there.<sup>106</sup> This research observed that the willingness to stay through the challenging seasons of ministry resulted in increased opportunities for community impact. The community often watch the minister's level of commitment through the challenges. Pastor A characterized longevity as critical, he admonished the rural pastor not to give up, believing the Lord will help during difficult assignments. He observed difficulty in gaining traction in the rural setting with a

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<sup>103</sup> Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Glenn Damon, *Shepherding the Small Church: A Leadership Guide for the Majority of Today's Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishing, 2002), 31.

<sup>106</sup> Pastor H interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

continual transition in pastoral leadership.<sup>107</sup> Several ministers recalled the temptation of looking for another ministry location but realized the needed to stay and remain faithful to the Lord where they served. Longevity tends to produce trust from the community.

### **Overcoming Dysfunctional Factors**

Fifty percent of the ministers reported having to overcome control issues in their church, including possible board member qualms. Pastor J recounted how the church board tied his and the previous pastor's hands. He brought this issue to the congregation and all the board members left and most of the church left.<sup>108</sup> This low point in ministry positioned the church for turnaround, brought freedom from control, and began the process of a turnaround in the church. Pastor D detailed how church leaders instructed church members on how to give their finances in ways that would keep them from contributing to the salary of the pastor.<sup>109</sup> Changing the pastor's salary from a percentage of the offering to a set amount helped break an element of control in the church.

The hostility towards other congregants proves detrimental to growth and leads to plateau or decline. Pastor G attributed a segment of the decision to close the church he pastored to the fighting that occurred, even to the point of verbal altercations during the sermon.<sup>110</sup> He reflected upon new people came but not stay due to the church's toxic environment. Several pastors referenced "getting hurt" or "beat up" during these difficulties and referenced the need for recovery time to heal from the pain of these experiences. Authors James Kouzes and Barry

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<sup>107</sup> Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.

<sup>108</sup> Pastor J interview with Paul Maunu, February 18, 2020.

<sup>109</sup> Pastor D interview with Paul Maunu, February 17, 2020.

<sup>110</sup> Pastor I interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

Posner in *The Leadership Challenge* described leaders that lost confidence during difficulties, which lowered the aspirations of the organization.<sup>111</sup> Overcoming the challenges within the church provided the opportunity for growth.

Church leadership controversy presents challenges for healthy ministry. Pastor D referenced a difficult time when a board member committed suicide and how people blamed him for this tragedy which resulting in three board members and half the church leaving.<sup>112</sup> He denoted how the community views these times of opposition between the pastor and church members making growth difficult. When churches unite and work together well, they reposition themselves for growth. Pastor J remembered after his entire board left plus most of his church, the remaining people got excited about church and new people began attending services. Ministry became fun again for him and the church body.<sup>113</sup> Division within church tends to steal the joy and energy from church life. Pastor H had the founding pastor and his family attend the church and people reported that “he never did it like that before,” which presented a challenge until the former pastor left.<sup>114</sup> These leadership challenges can keep the focus off body ministry and outreach to the community. The issues of control, conflict, and division among church leadership presented obstacles that these pastors overcame in the process of the turnaround.

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<sup>111</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hoboken, NJ: A Wiley Brand, 2017), 238. Kindle Edition.

<sup>112</sup> Pastor D interview with Paul Maunu, February 17, 2020.

<sup>113</sup> Pastor J interview with Paul Maunu, February 18, 2020.

<sup>114</sup> Pastor H interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.



## Theological Reflection

This project has contributed to my understanding of theology and ecclesiology. The key aspects of church turnaround included: spiritual growth, creative outreach, and empowering partnerships. These factors could seem far-reaching, yet the broad basis of growth contributed to this deeper understanding. The Apostle Paul said, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal. 6:9).<sup>115</sup> The willingness of these pastors to implement correct doctrine, right passion, and sound actions inspired reflection.

## Rural Revitalization Orthodoxy

This research produced factors that revealed valuable *orthodoxy* concerning rural ministry. As ministries within the Pentecostal context the desire to establish the right set of beliefs though this study added valuable reflection. Growing in our spiritual fervency with the Lord claimed a prominent place in the research. This practice provides a foundational framework to produce further ministry in the rural context.

Embracing evangelism in the church represents further orthodoxy. Miller in *The Spirit of God in Mission* commenting on Acts 1:8 said, “every evangelistic and missionary advance of the church is preceded by one or more empowerings with the Holy Spirit. Through these outpourings the church is again and again empowered and equipped for its missional task.”<sup>116</sup> The Pentecostal minister understands evangelism and outreach flow out of encounters with God through the work of the Holy Spirit. The willingness to go beyond the church building to meet

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<sup>115</sup> Galatians 6:9, ESV.

<sup>116</sup> Denzil R. Miller, *The Spirit of God in Mission: A Vocational Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Springfield, MO: PneumaLife Publications, 2013), 40.

people in their context and minister on their turf represents the biblical mandate to go. Author and partnership expert Mary Lederleitner, in *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, commented “At the heart of this issue of dignity and mutuality is how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others. Or, perhaps more accurately stated, at the heart of the issue is whether we perceive others as God does. God’s love is the same for all of his children.”<sup>117</sup> Pushing through the obstacles to encourage people to experience salvation through Christ compels ministry in the rural context.

Ministering through the framework of relationship provides a biblical precedent to consider in the rural community. Isolationism hinders ministry and limits effectiveness in rural America. Working with those inside the church, with our peers from other churches and even with leadership from our movement; follows the biblical framework for ministry. Author Karen Hawkins in her book *Assistants and Leaders* referenced how Scripture provides a picture of God using teams and partnerships in support of leadership.<sup>118</sup> The framework for the minister to support the leadership over them and receive support from the people of the church seems part of the biblical pattern. This understanding impacts both relations with the leaders on the district level and within the church.

### **Rural Revitalization Orthopraxis**

This research revealed how rural ministry can produce the right action. *Orthopraxy* seems important to model in smaller communities. The rural context often leads to making judgments on the way ministry functions. These viewpoints may represent a correct or incorrect

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<sup>117</sup> Mary T. Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), loc. 1469. Kindle Edition.

<sup>118</sup> Karen Hawkins, *Assistants and Leaders: Building Effective Ministry Partnerships* (Seattle, WA: YWAM Publications, 2014), loc. 407. Kindle Edition.

perspective. When the church practices solid biblical patterns the effect in small communities proved significant.

Prayer represents the right practice for small communities. Aaron Morrow quotes J. I. Packer in *Small Town Mission* as saying, “Evangelistic fruitfulness will not come unless God also reforms our life of prayer.”<sup>119</sup> Morrow saw prayer as a key element of Christian mission, making prayer an integral part in the turnaround stories told. Pastor E discussed partnership with his wife that pushed each other to pray and fast and realized it would have helped to have additional encouragement to pray and fast.<sup>120</sup> Prayer brings clarity and positions the church to receive breakthrough from the Lord.

Going to people in their point of need represents correct practice. Jung believed “Effective rural pastors today cannot merely be spectators in the communities they serve. They must be participants... all of these activities, of course imply a theology of active presence.”<sup>121</sup> The practice of presence in rural may become overlooked yet going beyond the walls of the church to participate in their community empowers the minister. Miller stated, “Any follower of Christ who wants to be more fully used by Him to spread the message of God’s love to their neighbors next door, or to the multitudes around the world can be empowered by the Spirit.”<sup>122</sup> The active engagement of people that need salvation through Jesus motivates the church to meet people in their point of need with the Spirit-empowered Gospel. The church that goes into the community represents the church positioned for use by our Lord.

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<sup>119</sup> Aaron Morrow, *Small Town Mission: A Guide for Mission-Driven Communities* (USA: GCD Books, 2016), loc. 580. Kindle Edition.

<sup>120</sup> Pastor E interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Jung, *Rural Ministry*, 198.

<sup>122</sup> Miller, *The 1:8 Promise of Jesus*, 38.

## Rural Revitalization Orthopathos

This research developed stronger insight into the passions of the pastors surveyed.

*Orthopathos* of the pastors revealed the heart of the pastor. The passion for Christ and ministry impacted their ministry mission field. Their passion for God and ministry provided multiple points of inspiration. Pastors surveyed, overcame various obstacles to maintain right passion in their experiences.

A passion to bring people to Jesus exemplified right passion. Theologian Gordon Fee in *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* described the Apostle Paul's singular passion of Jesus and the gospel message.<sup>123</sup> This desire to know and love Jesus and to make Him known revealed the compassion of the rural churches for people. This passion motivated kingdom advancement in rural settings. The challenges surrounding numbers equating to successful ministry needed clarification. It appears improper to say "numbers do not matter" when each person who responds to Jesus in faith matters. The most significant measure of ministry success defined only by numbers can also present a difficulty. The focus on the individual that responds to Christ should obtain value and celebration instead of a lament of 'only one person' came to faith. Both 'many new converts' and 'one new convert' carry great value.

A passion to embrace sacrificial ministry brings honor to the Lord and flows from a heart filled with passion for the Savior. Pastoring in the rural setting after receiving a call from the Lord can express a deepened spiritual fervency toward the Lord. The community size does not represent the value of the ministry venture; the faithfulness to the Lord exemplifies a key to correct passion. These pastors embodied examples of ministers loving Jesus well through

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<sup>123</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 124. Kindle Edition.

service to their church and communities. Understanding the mission the Lord called the minister to embrace within a unique context represents a high calling.

A passion to grow stronger together seemed to influence the motivation for partnership; joining for the purpose of ministry reinforcement offered incentive. These alliances assisted pastor's movement beyond isolationism and personal kingdom building towards strength and encouragement. Pastor G reflected on the relationship that developed with the parent affiliated pastor and how that relationship offering continued value.<sup>124</sup> This relationship strengthens both the daughter and parent church.

The accounts of these interviews provided examples of sound theological doctrine, practices, and passion. Successful Pentecostal rural ministry tends to flow from these factors. The determination to overcome any challenge to *Orthodoxy*, *Orthopraxy*, and *Orthopathos* gave pause for reflection and response. The pastors interviewed offered a solid biblical framework for success in the rural context.

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<sup>124</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

## **Application for Rural Church Turnaround**

This research provided information to consider when a pastor leads a rural church through the season of plateau and decline. These pastors lived through experiences that offered a pathway leading to church turnaround. Each circumstance included different challenges yet considering key components of turnaround offers encouragement and help for the minister in a plateau or decline season.

### **Establish the Call**

The call to a place of ministry provides a framework for pastoral ministry to occur. Pastor H recalled considering leaving his church for another ministry opportunity during difficult times and advised pastors in that position not to quit.<sup>125</sup> Discouragement can provide a difficult attribute to overcome. Karl Vaters in *The Grasshopper Myth* stated, “conferences and books were more likely to leave me discouraged and frustrated than excited and motivated.”<sup>126</sup> The attempts to offer help may add to discouragement. Finding the incentive to stay in the fight may represent the real battleground. Pastor C wrestling with his call resulting in a more defined call to rural pastoral ministry.<sup>127</sup> A sure call to a place of ministry tends to sustain the minister during the challenges. Establishing the call within the heart of the pastor may represent a question to settle.

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<sup>125</sup> Pastor H interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>126</sup> Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth: Big Churches, Small Churches and the Small Thinking that Divides Us* (Montclair, CA: New Small Church, 2012), 3.

<sup>127</sup> Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

Pastoral transition may need consideration during seasons of plateau or decline. Seeking the Lord about the call to a place of ministry could lead to transition. Pastor G encouraged pastors to understand that they should minister in their setting but balanced his advice with the understanding that sometimes the pastor needs transition.<sup>128</sup> When a call comes from the Lord, knowing and responding to it blesses the church and minister. Pastor E recalled that the previous pastor had been talked out of retiring for five years and how that contributed to church decline.<sup>129</sup> Faithfulness to a pastorate or people should not carry more importance than faithfulness to the Lord's leading in the present context. The calling from the Lord may change; continual listening to the Lord remains necessary.

### **Pursue Spiritual Growth**

Spiritual growth and development offer a valuable pursuit during the season of plateau or decline. Each minister connected with the Lord in a unique way. The ability to draw close to the Lord and embrace the work of the Holy Spirit leads to spiritual breakthroughs. This process includes increased personal prayer times, focused prayer with fellow ministers, church members or family members. Seeking a fresh Baptism in the Holy Spirit provides a potential encounter and empowerment. Pentecostal scholar Grant McClung in *Azusa Street & Beyond* stated, "At the heart of the early Pentecostals' missiology was their personal experience with the Holy Spirit found around an altar of prayer with fellow seekers."<sup>130</sup> As Pentecostals, dependence upon the work of the Spirit proves critical to healthy spirituality. Pastor A discussed the heart of the

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<sup>128</sup> Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

<sup>129</sup> Pastor E interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.

<sup>130</sup> Grant McClung, ed., *Azusa Street & Beyond: 100 years of Commentary on Global Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement* (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2006), 4.

pastor and the necessity for sound ministry flowing from spiritual well-being.<sup>131</sup> Healthy spirituality positions the minister for health in other areas of ministry and empowers the minister to overcome the plateau and decline challenges.

The process of pursuing after the Lord takes self-discipline and dedication. The rural pastor must provide spiritual leadership to himself or herself. Bierly stated, “In a small church you must be your own pastor.”<sup>132</sup> The minister may depend upon church hierarchy but needs to shepherd their spiritual lives. Often no pastors or spiritual leaders check on the condition of their spiritual walk with the Lord. Growing in relationship with the Lord takes dedication.

### **Initiate Outreach**

Rural pastors benefit from ministering outside the church and reaching into the community. During the difficult seasons of ministry, a tendency can develop to withdraw from taking bold risks. Focusing more on the people within the church and the internal challenges might prove valuable; yet, when this focus prevents outreach, an unhealthy situation can occur. The minister that takes the risk and leads the church to a community focus facilitates the churches turnaround movement. Reframing the outreach events changes the factors often associated with outreach to intentional activity that reveals God’s love towards the community in partnership with the congregation. The expectation of new people coming to the church may need adjusted to different measurements of success.

Outreach can seem daunting during challenging times but these activities often encourage pastors and church members.<sup>133</sup> Pastor F described taking a Sunday to go out into the

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<sup>131</sup> Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.

<sup>132</sup> Bierly, *How to Thrive as a Small-Church Pastor*, 101.

<sup>133</sup> Ministers going through the season of plateau or decline tend to deal with discouragement among other factors. Embracing outreach comes with risks but proves worth the risk.



community to clean and paint instead of meeting together, leading to someone asking why they would do that.<sup>134</sup> These outreaches impact the pastor, church membership, and the perspective of community members. Intentional outreach allows God to work in a new way through the church and brings new energy to the church and pastor. Overcoming the obstacles that hinder outreach and fresh consideration of what successful ministry in the local context looks like may prove key.

### **Establish Relationships**

Find people to offer outside perspective in this process. Christian A. Schwarz and Christoph Schalk in *Natural Church Development* discussed how pastors often only see part of the picture, but further perspectives lead to a clearer picture.<sup>135</sup> Challenging times may prove overwhelming; tending to isolate, discourage, and cloud vision. Developing trusted voices to speak into personal and ministry-related factors provides value. Not every person dialoguing with the minister brought value or insight and some insight did not prove helpful, yet many pastors reported valuable insight offered by leaders and colleagues. Pastor F detailed how important a good associate pastor proved in his setting.<sup>136</sup> Others' perspective presented value and assisted overcoming plateau and decline.

Friendship offers a key element for turnaround. Pastor B explained how important an area pastor's friendship became for him on a personal and ministry level.<sup>137</sup> The development of strong friendships seemed to help overcome discouragement and forward ministry momentum.

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<sup>134</sup> Pastor F interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.

<sup>135</sup> Christian A. Schwarz and Christoph Schalk, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1998), 21.

<sup>136</sup> Pastor F interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Pastor B interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.

Author and pastor Troy Jones in *Recalibrate Your Church* discussed how some church leaders have a mentality that ‘all I need is God’ or more prayer will cause kingdom impact. Jones believed this mindset led to isolation and discouragement; instead, he demonstrated how God speaks through people giving insight into our situations.<sup>138</sup> Relationships require investment and demand vulnerability. Healthy relationships add value and contribute to ministry advancement.

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<sup>138</sup> Troy H. Jones, *Recalibrate Your Church: How Your Church Can Reach Its Full Kingdom Impact* (USA: The Recalibrate Group, 2016), 89. Kindle Edition.

## Conclusion

This research came out of the pain and challenges that marked my ministry story. Answering the question; what factors led rural pastors from a season of plateau or decline to turnaround producing church growth, originated through personal experience. The desire to help the struggling rural minister through these tough times of ministry motivated this study. Encouragement for ministry in the rural context developed out of this research. My perspective grew through the shared accounts. Schwarz and Schalk offered insight as they described their natural church development research, “on average, the smaller churches are the better churches.”<sup>139</sup> Reframing the understanding of the value of the rural church and how to measure value grew through this study. Relationships developed through times of prayer with some of the ministers interviewed. Ideas developed and understanding of ministry elements in the rural context became refined. Other rural pastors discussing aspects of this study have received encouragement. The hope that districts might gain further insight from these pastors concerning attributes connected to turning rural churches around represents value. The pastors interviewed seemed excited to share the good and bad parts of their story with the hope that others might benefit from this research. The church overcoming seasons of plateau or decline tend to operate through inspiration bringing kingdom impact. The rural church in America faces growth challenges including isolation and discouragement factors. The inspiration from the accounts of the turnaround in these communities brought more exhilaration than expected. The effectiveness of the rural church provided insight, comparable components, and encouragement for the struggling pastor.

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<sup>139</sup> Schwarz and Schalk, *Natural Church Development*, 200.

This thesis research encompassed sections of research methodology, literature review, findings and analysis, theological reflections, and application. The key components that developed from the interviews of rural pastors became the significant contributions of the research. Spiritual fervency, productive relationships, and community outreach developed out of each experience and would characterize the most important elements leading to turnaround in these ten rural churches. These elements provide factors to consider for pastors ministering in the plateau or decline season.

Spiritual fervency represents the key component of the research. Encouragement and strength from the Lord impacted ministry. The ten pastors referenced a variety of components including prayer, ministry events leading to encounter with God, and sabbatical. The methods varied yet the importance of a deeper relationship with God remained key. Pentecostal ministers need to focus on this factor; spirituality as expected made a significant contribution to turnaround.

Productive relationships revealed the second key component from the interviews. This factor represented the unforeseen element of this research. The knowledge that relationships play an important role in ministry does not represent a new concept, but the importance of this factor represented more emphasis than expected. The interviews demonstrated that relationships impacted turnaround. Unlike spiritual fervency that validated a previous idea of importance, the relationship dynamics held a more significant contribution than expected. This element provided the key discovery from the researcher's perspective.

Community outreach inspired and documented a pathway through plateau or decline. This third key component offered creativity that broke through hindrances to growth. The leading of outreach during plateau or decline represent risks that these pastors overcame and

the result produced Kingdom impact. Action provided key elements to these accounts and brought encouragement to the church. The rural church needs to initiate outreach as a part of turnaround and growth.

The reasons for the celebration of rural churches or urban churches needs reconsideration, while the success of the urban church needs attention and honor the rural church likewise needs acclamation. Those dynamics that make the rural church effective and impactful need celebrated. Both church structure and attributes can lead to kingdom impact. An adjustment from most of the focus placed on the larger city churches to sharing the spotlight with the rural small church would provide benefit, as both may inform the other. Discovering and celebrating aspects of rural and urban churches offers valuable insight; mega churches and growing rural churches overcome challenges and lead impactful ministries.

Honoring the forgotten places and unknown stories provided key research outcomes. Professor Carl Dudley in *Making the Small Church Effective* stated, “When church size is measured by human relationships, the small church is the largest expression of the Christian faith.”<sup>140</sup> The understanding of effective ministry ventures impacts the way others view small and valuable churches. Finding heroes in small towns worth celebrating, like the ten pastors interviewed, validates ministries that honor our Savior. Spirit-empowered ministry offers an opportunity to focus on the rural context. Value from rural ministry often impacts a fresh paradigm.

The pastors surveyed modeled factors of Christ-honoring ministry. Each minister represented a picture of faithfulness to their call from the Lord in their unique rural community.

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<sup>140</sup> Carl S. Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective*, 16<sup>th</sup> ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 48.

They proved examples of pursuing the Lord, investing in their communities for the mission's sake, and partnering with people inside and outside the church for forward church movement. These churches and communities received blessings through the willingness of these pastors to overcome the plateau and decline obstacles through leading the turnaround. New people came to faith and their eternity changed. May their examples inspire others to lead a turnaround in their communities for the honor and glory of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.

This research instructed, inspired, and further stimulated the desire for additional understanding. Further research could detail whether the three key components; spiritual fervency, productive relationships, and community outreach impact the urban church in a similar manner. Considering how turnaround occurs in the urban setting would provide valuable insight. Additional study of other groups of pastors in Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations would provide stimulation. The ability to compare the Assemblies of God with additional groups would offer value. A quantitative research of pastors surveyed could offer further clarity on various aspects, providing deeper understanding to provide a stronger case. These discoveries lead to further desires to understand in a more thorough manner the rural church environment.

The accounts of change and the impact of moving beyond the struggle points of ministry need reflection and consideration. Cloud stated, "Hope is one of the most powerful forces in the universe. With hope, we can endure almost anything, and certainly more than if we lose it or don't have it to begin with. In short, hope keeps us going."<sup>141</sup> These pastors embraced hope in a variety of ways; through strength from the Lord, through encouragement from others, through taking steps to step outside the church into the community among other factors. The steps pastors attempted brought a shift that led these churches to overcome plateau and decline and

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<sup>141</sup> Cloud, *Necessary Endings*, 84.

establish turnaround. This research provided pathways of optimism for the health of pastors and strength for churches in rural America. The pastor that finds their church in plateau or decline need not feel defeated or overwhelmed. These accounts encourage others to discover pathways for establishing hope and sparking a church turnaround. Our Lord Jesus Christ partners with churches in this endeavor through the work of the Holy Spirit. I pray this research inspires momentum from plateau or decline leading to turnaround for the rural churches of America.

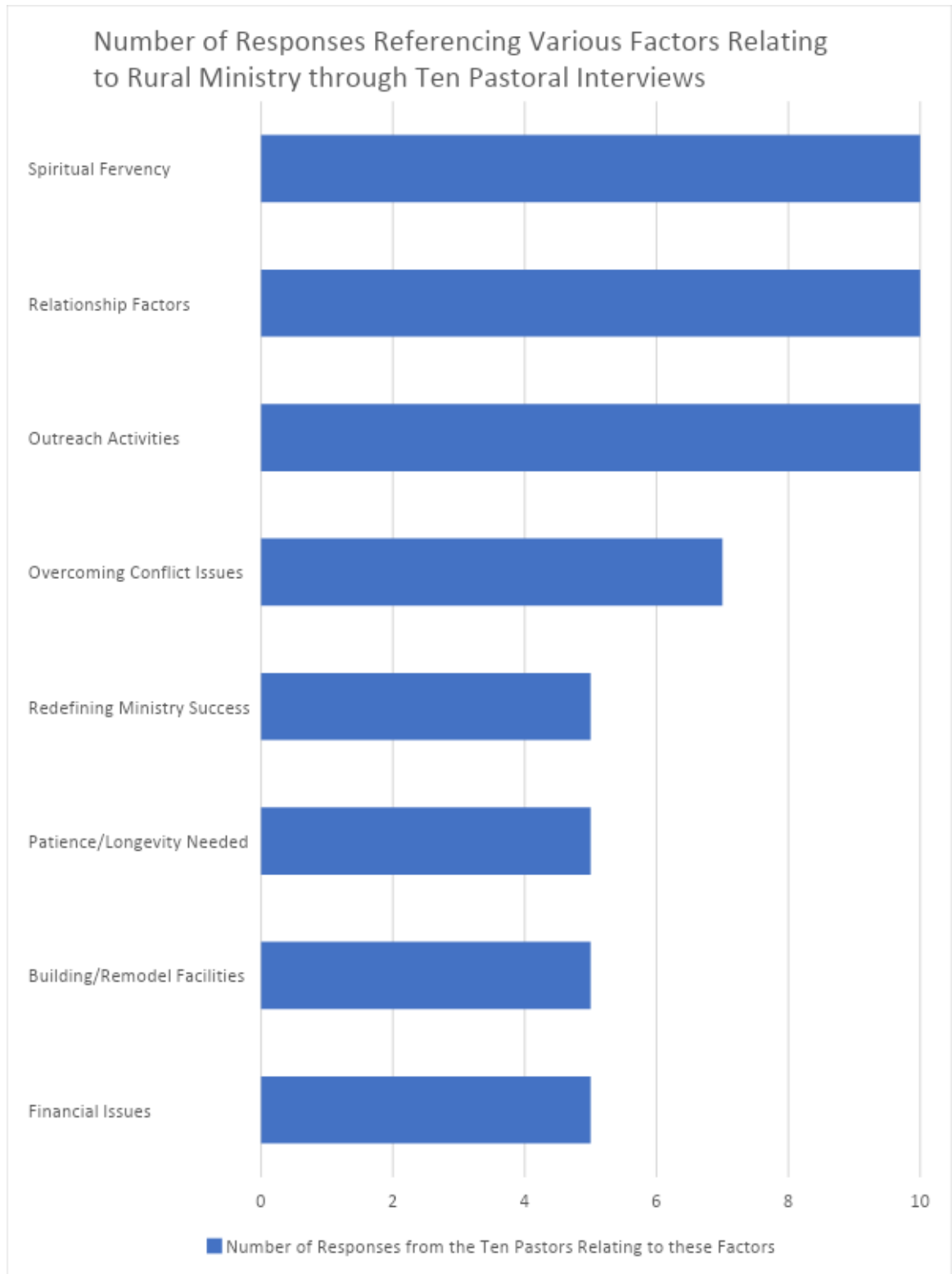
## Appendix

Chart chapter number that you refer to this.1

<b>Church</b>	<b>Community Size</b>	<b>Low Attendance</b>	<b>High Attendance</b>	<b>Percentage Growth</b>	<b>State</b>
<b>A</b>	<b>2700</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>92%</b>	<b>IL</b>
<b>B</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>150%</b>	<b>NE</b>
<b>C</b>	<b>720</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>MO</b>
<b>D</b>	<b>3200</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>640%</b>	<b>KS</b>
<b>E</b>	<b>756</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>320%</b>	<b>KS</b>
<b>F</b>	<b>2300</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>602%</b>	<b>KS</b>
<b>G</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>87%</b>	<b>TX</b>
<b>H</b>	<b>592</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>170%</b>	<b>TX</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>1493</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>195%</b>	<b>TX</b>
<b>J</b>	<b>2700</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>566%</b>	<b>TX</b>



**Chart chapter number.2**



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#### **Interviews**

- Daman Glenn interview with Paul Maunu, January 22, 2020.
- Roth Brad interview with Paul Maunu, January 22, 2020.
- Pastor A interview with Paul Maunu, February 26, 2020.
- Pastor B interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.
- Pastor C interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.
- Pastor D interview with Paul Maunu, February 17, 2020.
- Pastor E interview with Paul Maunu, February 19, 2020.
- Pastor F interview with Paul Maunu, February 20, 2020.
- Pastor G interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.
- Pastor H interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.
- Pastor I interview with Paul Maunu, February 13, 2020.
- Pastor J interview with Paul Maunu, February 18, 2020.

#### **Scriptures**

- Acts 1:8, ESV.
- Acts 4:31, ESV.
- 2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV.
- Galatians 6:9, ESV.