

WE DO NOT LOSE HEART:
MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP IN DYING CONGREGATIONS

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2019

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ABSTRACT

We Do Not Lose Heart: Missional Leadership in Dying Congregations

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Reading this paper will not show you how to save your dying congregation, nor will it help you euthanize it. This project likens missional leadership to a hospice intervention: in the face of an adaptive challenge, the pastor creates an environment in which the congregation can find the support, confidence, and encouragement it needs. This pragmatic action research project utilized a transformative mixed method design to impact missional pastors serving in dying congregations in the Montana Synod of the ELCA. The primary intervention model was a missional search conference. Biblical lenses included 2 Corinthians 4 and Matthew 25:31-46. Theological lenses were the leadership of the Holy Spirit and missional ecclesiology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am so very grateful for the many friends and colleagues who have come alongside me during this project. I wish to acknowledge my Doctor of Ministry cohort: Meghan, Albert, Minnesota Doug, Mary, Andy, Neil, Ernest, Laurie, and Greg. My professors have been great, too: Dwight, Teri, David, Alvin, and Dan. My thanks also go out to the members of my research cohort: Mark, Michael, Barb, Natalie, and Peggy. I thank my colleagues in the Montana Synod, and especially Bishop Jessica Crist for her leadership and support for this project. I want to acknowledge and thank the people of the congregations I have served over the years. You have shown me what the love of Jesus is.

I am thankful for the incredible team of people I have worked with in hospice care, especially Errol, Audrey, Kim, Jane, Joni, Sherry, Kathy, and Jen. I offer my thanks as well to every hospice volunteer who picked up the phone when I called, and to the amazing hospital staff: Troy, Amy, Becci, and Mr. B. I have had the privilege of working with some great funeral directors who have taught me much about ministering with grieving families. Thank you, Duane, Tom, Bill, and Bill.

Finally, I thank God for my family for putting up with me during this pursuit. Mom and Dad, you raised me in the faith and inspired me to follow in your footsteps. Ben and Hannah, never forget that you are precious children of God. And I dedicate this paper to you, Brenda, my beautiful bride. Thanks for saying yes.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIM	Associate in Ministry
AR	Action Research
COPD	Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
DEM	Director for Evangelical Mission
DNR	Do Not Resuscitate
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
GST	General Systems Theory
IDT	Interdisciplinary Team
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LBW	Lutheran Book of Worship
LPA	Lay Pastoral Associate
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
WDNLH	We Do Not Lose Heart

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I walked into the modest home of a new hospice patient. As chaplain, I had been assigned this home visit. My role was to introduce myself, assess the spiritual needs of the patient and her family, review hospice education and procedures, and see how the family was coping. The husband greeted me at the door and walked me past the kitchen table mounded with medications, magazines, and the remains of breakfast. The patient was in her favorite chair, the news droning on the television next to her. I introduced myself, noting the noise of the television, and asked if we could turn down the volume. We made small talk about the weather, the cat, and the qualities of a good cup of coffee. When the conversation paused, I asked the woman: “So, how are you?”

“I am DYING!” she blurted out, exasperated.

I acknowledged her emotion and anxiety with a long pause. Then I responded as gently and warmly as I could. “I know. That is why you are in our program, and why I have come to visit you this morning. Given that you are dying: how are you?”

The woman processed what I had just said. Then she exhaled, considered for moment, and, in a quieter, calmer tone, began to talk about her fears and feelings. We

reviewed pain management strategies. We talked about our families and faith. We were two people having a conversation. She was dying, but she was not dead yet.¹

I walked into the doublewide modular sanctuary that was the home for Reservation Lutheran Church.² I was greeted by a cold breeze and broken glass. Vandals had broken in the night before in search of communion wine and an extra helping from the food bank we housed. Two couples who arrived early for worship helped cover the window and clean up the glass. We talked about the weather, the local high school basketball team, and the qualities of a good cup of coffee. A few minutes after 11:00 am, all eight of us took our seats for worship. The piano player was out of town with her grandkids. We would sing *a cappella* this week.

I stood up and faced the congregation. As gently and warmly as I could, I began our worship: “The Lord be with you!”

“And also with you,” they said in unison. We confessed our sins. We sang praises. We listened to God’s word. We prayed for our community. We encouraged and supported one another. We were a Lutheran congregation engaged in Sunday morning worship. We were dying, but we were not dead yet.³

Leading Missionally in Dying Congregations

I have been a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) since 1993. I spent the first fifteen years of my pastoral ministry striving to grow

¹ This scene is a compilation of numerous encounters I had while serving as a chaplain for a small hospice program in western Montana.

² Pseudonym.

³ This scene, too, is a snapshot of ministry serving a small congregation in western Montana.

churches. I even saw some relative success as a member of the pastoral staff of what grew to be one of the largest congregations in the Montana Synod.⁴ I was well into ministry in my second pastorate when one day I heard God ask me a question: *Would you rather have a successful church or a relationship with Me?* This question showed me my pride and bad theology. The Spirit then led me through a wilderness of repentance and renewal as I humbled myself and surrendered my life to Christ. Our family moved back to Montana, and I took a part time job as a hospice chaplain. That is where the Spirit began to teach me that it is God's church, not mine. It is God's mission, not mine.

I was working as a hospice chaplain when I began this project. I was also serving as the pastor of two very small Lutheran congregations. I came to understand that caring for dying people and ministering to dying congregations are similar callings. I was surprised by the richness of both ministries. I was inspired by the resiliency and faith of dying patients and dying congregations. My theological training was informing my hospice work. Hospice work was shaping my approach to pastoral leadership. I was learning to embrace mortality. I was encountering the Holy Spirit at work in my tiny congregations on Sundays and in the hospice team on Mondays. I was being encouraged, supported and growing in confidence in both fields. This project seeks to encourage, support, and equip pastors through missional concepts and hospice principles for their ministry with and in their dying congregations.

⁴ My thanks to Bishop Jessica Crist for her permission for me to identify the location of my research. I also appreciate her support for this overall project.

Dying Congregations

People do not like the term ‘dying congregation.’ Many asked me to use a different descriptor: *very small, at-risk, dwindling, declining, failing, stuck, shrinking, struggling, transitioning, and aging*. I noticed, however, that these were all euphemisms used by hospice patients and families for the end of life. Dying, however, does not mean ‘dead,’ or ‘should be closed up,’ or ‘unfaithful.’ To say that someone or something is dying is not a moral judgement or criticism. It is descriptive, not prescriptive. It is the word we use when describing an organism that is losing strength and running out of resources. It means that systems are shutting down, and that the person or group or system cannot do all the things he or she or it used to do. The natural course of life is, or at least appears to be, nearing completion. Sometimes dying things recover. Eventually, though, everything dies.

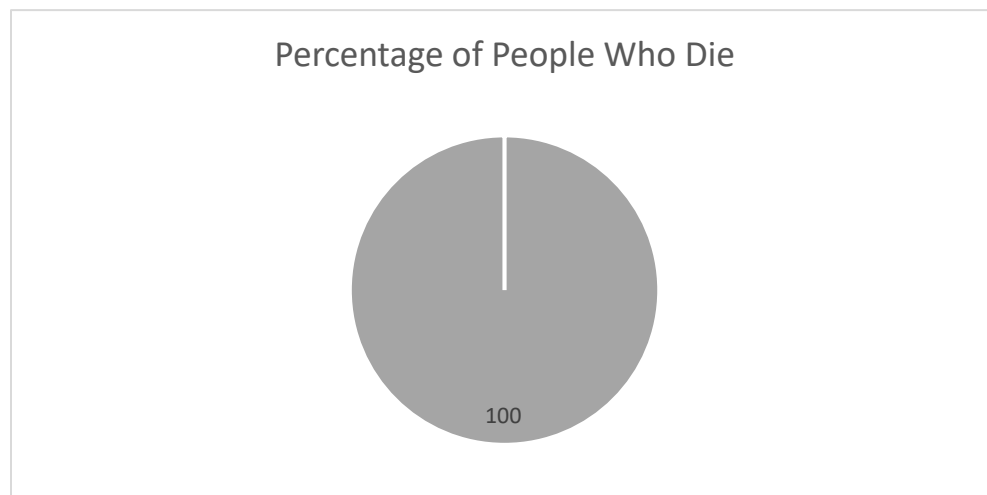


Figure 1. Mortality Rate

This project embraces the language of the dying congregation. The mortality rate for humans hovers at right about one hundred percent, after all (see figure 1).⁵ The Christian gospel embraces the reality of death, and the power of God to raise the dead. “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has been raised from the dead...” (1 Corinthians 15:19-20a).⁶ Everything dies, including denominations, ministries, and local congregations. Hospice interventions open up a world of conversations about things that matter like faith, spirituality, grief, loss, love, bucket lists, regret, forgiveness, reconciliation, heaven, gratitude, suffering, peace, dignity, and compassion.

Euphemisms about dying promote denial. A *very small* congregation can convince itself that it just needs to try harder to grow. An *aging* congregation can maintain the myth that all it needs is the right young pastor. What, exactly, is a congregation *in transition*? If I described a hospice patient as “transitioning,” the staff knew that I meant “this person is exhibiting system break down. She is actively dying and will no longer be breathing by this time tomorrow.”

Almost nobody **LIKES** to talk about death and dying, especially their own. It turns out, however, that nearly everybody **NEEDS** to talk about death and dying, especially their own. Patients and family members often looked forward to hospice visits

⁵ I admit my research here is anecdotal. A word about my use of humor: in my experience as a pastor and hospice chaplain, conversations about death and dying often make people anxious and uncomfortable. My use of humor is intended to lower levels of anxiety, in order to help people process feelings and decisions regarding end of life care. I include some humor in this paper to reflect this approach.

⁶ *Holy Bible: New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011). All Bible references in this paper are quoted from the NIV unless otherwise indicated. Used by permission.

just because they could talk with us about things no one else wanted to hear. People are dying to talk about death.

Missional Theology and Hospice Principles

Hospice is a wholistic, end-of-life philosophy and approach to health care that is aimed at promoting human dignity and alleviating suffering. Hospice nurses, doctors, social workers, bath aides, team up with family members, faith communities, and caregivers to help the patient to face the end of life with confidence and support. The goal is to care for the patient and family rather than to cure the disease.

A missional approach to leading the church understands that God is present in the world. God is at work reconciling all things to God and each other through the person of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. God has a mission, and God has created the church for the sake of that mission. The church is created to be a “sign, instrument, and foretaste”⁷ of God’s promised future.

I realize that hospice care and missional leadership are not generally thought of in the same breath. Here is where they intersect: missional leaders fully trust God to accomplish God’s purposes, and this brings the leader a supernatural confidence and energy for ministry. There is a similar energy and confidence in a hospice intervention. God gives life to every creature. Every day is a gift. Our lives are not our own. There are things we can control. There are things that we cannot control. Whether I am leading a dying congregation or loving a dying patient, I am called on to trust God to accomplish God’s purposes, and to entrust them both—and myself—to God’s mercy.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 136.

We Do Not Lose Heart

Pastoral leadership in dying congregations can be lonely and discouraging. Most of the world says that if you are not growing your church then you are not doing your job. Most ministry resources are designed for congregations with staff, office hours, committees, and indoor plumbing. One-third of the congregations of the Montana Synod of the ELCA reported thirty or fewer weekly worshippers.⁸ Many are served by Lay Pastoral Associates (LPAs) and other lay professionals. Traditional economic models of sustaining congregational structures are no longer viable in Montana and in many parts of the country.

The Bible is rich with stories and texts that talk about the power and presence of God in difficult circumstances. The Apostle Paul encourages us not to lose heart when facing adversity, because all of it is held in the mercy of God (2 Corinthians 4:1-18). All congregations, including the dying ones, point to and reveal God's kingdom in and for the sake of the world.⁹ When we treat dying congregations with dignity and respect, we acknowledge their inherent worth and show the world the transforming power of the love of God.

This project grew out of a desire to find ways to encourage other pastors to persevere. I wanted them to find a way to share with my colleagues the support I had experienced as a hospice chaplain. I wanted them to understand that they were not alone. Their ministry with their congregations was a unique and rewarding calling.

⁸ ELCA Research and Evaluation, "Montana Synod Data Kit," July 23, 2016, 7–9, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/1F_Montana_data_kit.pdf?_ga=2.231995295.1059866320.1504720440-1668599598.1452966834.

⁹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

I believe that the larger church will be forced to address many of these issues in the coming decades. The knowledge generated by this research contributes a fresh perspective to the larger, national conversation about the changing landscape of congregational ministry.

My Research Question

Congregations are dying. Leaders are discouraged. We have this ministry through God's mercy. These factors led me to consider this research question: *How might an action research (AR) intervention impact missional leaders of dying congregations?*

Methodology and Research Design

To explore the impact of this kind of intervention, I chose to utilize research methodology known as *Pragmatic Action Research (AR)*.¹⁰ AR is a research strategy that seeks to generate knowledge that can equip people to work effectively together for democratic social change. Pragmatic AR is undergirded by key concepts such as *democratic structure*, *general systems theory (GST)* and *pragmatic worldview*. The democratic structure of AR means that responsibility for control and coordination of the process is located at the level where the work is performed. GST views the world as fundamentally composed of open, interacting systems, rather than individual, unrelated units.¹¹ Pragmatists believe that the purpose and value of any learning is to effect change for the good. Taken together, pragmatic action research

¹⁰ Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007); Merrelyn Emery and Ronald E. Purser, *The Search Conference: A Powerful Method for Planning Organizational Change and Community Action* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

¹¹ Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*, 57.

aims to solve pertinent problems in a given context through a democratic inquiry where professional researchers collaborate with participants in the effort to seek and enact solutions to problems of major importance to the local people.¹²

The intervention I chose was a *search conference*. In a search conference, the researcher brings key members of an organization together to talk about what is going on and what are the shared goals of the group. The group discovers its shared reality and a common vision for a preferred future. The group then creates a team and a plan to work toward that future.

One reason I was drawn to this approach is that the tenets of this methodology and corresponding worldview are consistent with our Christian tradition. Letty Russell and others argue convincingly that every person at the table has inherent value and worth. Each person should be given the opportunity to voice their views for shaping their present and future.¹³ In Romans 12, the apostle Paul asserts that, as disciples offer their bodies as living sacrifices, they gain knowledge, or what he calls a “renewing of the mind” (Romans 12:1-2). Here and in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul underscores the value of each member of the body of Christ, and the need to express and allow expression of the various gifts. Earlier, in Romans 8, Paul encourages hope and perseverance of God’s people when facing adversity, reassuring his readers that “in all things God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to God’s purposes” (Romans 8:28).

¹² Greenwood and Levin, 62.

¹³ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1993), 57.

Variables

My AR intervention focused on a group of five ELCA pastors. The dependent variables in my study were the self-perceptions of the participants: how confident, how supported, and how encouraged they felt in their ministry to and with dying congregations.¹⁴ The primary intervention (independent variable) introduced in this study was a *search conference* (WDNLH 1.0) to consider the environment in which we were doing ministry, the strengths and challenges of the ministries themselves, and the particular gifts and abilities of our group. The group then decided to plan and lead a learning event for other pastors in the synod, which became a secondary intervention itself. The group engaged in monthly readings and conference calls. Cohort members shared leadership and logistics for the upcoming conference. Four months later thirty-six pastors and LPAs of the Montana Synod attended the event, which was called “We Do Not Lose Heart: Leading Congregations in Transition” (WDNLH 2.0).

This project dealt with two primary intervening variables. The first was the challenge of travel and logistics as central Montana experienced record-breaking snowfall that hindered travel to WDNLH 2.0. The second intervening variable was my own transition to a new call out of state in the middle of the research and writing phase of this project.

¹⁴ One member of the research group challenged the label of “dying congregation.” He said that he did not think the congregation was actively dying. “I would say we are an aging congregation,” he told the group.

Research Design

This research utilized a transformative mixed method design to impact missional leadership in dying congregations. Quantitative data were gathered from baseline and end line questionnaires to the initial search conference group using Google Forms. Participants of WDNLH 2.0 were given paper baseline and end line questionnaires. These questionnaires were designed to measure self-perceptions of confidence, support, and encouragement in their ministry settings. I digitally recorded and transcribed the original search conference for qualitative data. Easel pads were used to take notes during both conferences. Notes and journal entries record subsequent conversations and interviews. The interventions were created to effect positive change, making the research transformative in nature.¹⁵

Method

I collected qualitative and quantitative data in parallel, analyzed the data separately, and then merged the findings for analysis. Qualitative data were collected from both WDNLH 1.0 and WDNLH 2.0 participants from optional comments included in the baseline and end line questionnaires. The questionnaires collected quantitative data from each participant to see how, if at all, the interventions had changed their situation—or at least perceptions of their situation.¹⁶ Baseline and end line data were analyzed quantitatively, comparing the mean scores using paired t-tests. All questionnaires and

¹⁵ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 16.

¹⁶ Creswell, 133.

protocols were field tested with non-participant colleagues before being used for this research and are included in the appendices.

Participants

My original research cohort was a purposive sample comprised of five pastors, all actively serving ministries in the Montana Synod of the ELCA. Four served congregations that are small, declining, and/or are facing transitions in the next few years. The other participant was an ELCA pastor now serving as the Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) for the Montana Synod. This group was small enough to make the research manageable, to promote a strong connection between members of the search conference, and to simplify the logistics. Participants were selected by invitation. I reached out to colleagues that I have known and worked with in the synod. I asked them for referrals. I also asked for referrals from the synod office. I sought diversity in the group, and the resulting group was a mix of men and women, younger and older, from across the state of Montana.

Analysis

For the data gathered through quantitative instruments, I have reported descriptive statistics in total number of the sample (N), frequency, percentage, and mean where appropriate. I conducted inferential statistical measures, specifically conducting paired t-tests for analyzing the baseline and end line questionnaires. I used Microsoft Excel

spreadsheets and IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software¹⁷ as tools for analyzing my data.

My qualitative analysis relied first on the insights and conclusions identified by my cohort. This reflects the democratic nature of pragmatic research. I also reviewed the transcript of the original search conference. I took notes and kept journal entries of conference calls and personal communications. I compiled the comments from the questionnaires and collected the reflection papers from the original cohort. I listened closely for the language with which the participants described their contexts and challenges and identified concepts and concerns that were not picked up by the cohort.

Glossary of Terms

Adaptive challenges

Problems that are complicated, cannot be solved by a leader's authority or expertise, and require the organization to change normal ways of doing things in the organization.

Anticipatory grief

The experience of loss and sadness typically associated with a death that is felt before or leading up to the actual occurrence of death or loss.

Bereavement

The state or condition of having experienced a significant death or loss.

¹⁷ IBM, *SPSS Statistics for Windows*, version 25.0 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp., 2017), www.ibm.com/products/spss-statistics.

Democratic structure

Responsibility for control and coordination of the process is located at the level where the work is performed.

Dwelling in the Word

A devotional Bible reading method used with groups that encourages participants to listen to the Spirit, the scriptures, and to one another.

General Systems Theory (GST)

A key concept of the pragmatic worldview that focuses on the relationship between things more than the things themselves, for understanding how the world works.

Grief

The emotional response to the pain of loss.

Hospice

A holistic health care discipline focusing on providing palliative care to patients and families dealing with a terminal condition leading to a likely death within six months.

Interdisciplinary Team

The team of healthcare professionals—nurses, chaplain, social workers, doctors, pharmacist, therapists, and volunteers—who collaborate to provide a wholistic approach to caring for the hospice patient and family,

Missional

Theology that emphasizes *missio Dei*—the mission of God—as central to understanding the nature of God and the purpose of the Church.

Mourning

The responses a person makes to manage and process feelings of loss and grief.

Non-anxious presence

A key characteristic of hospice professionals and volunteers. It is the ability to convey calm and lower anxiety in situations and in other people. Professionalism, competence, and humor are some of the methods through which this is practiced.

Palliative care

Health care that focuses on pain management and the alleviation of suffering.

Pragmatism

A worldview conducive for mixed-methods research. Truth is whatever works at the time.¹⁸

Search conference

A method of scientific inquiry and problem solving that brings twenty to thirty-five key players of an organization together to identify adaptive challenges, discover possible solutions, and empower participants to effect the changes leading toward a preferred future.

Thin places

A concept from Celtic spirituality that refers to occasions, experiences, and geographic locations that seem to invite encounters with the sacred or supernatural.

¹⁸ Creswell, *Research Design*, 11.

Why This Matters

The ELCA is seeing a decline in numbers of congregations and members across the country. As of 2017, the number of congregations of Montana Synod decreased by eighteen percent since 1993.¹⁹ Even within vibrant, growing congregations there are always ministries, patterns of life, and groups that are aging, declining, and coming to an end. Colleagues serving congregations of all shapes and sizes resonated with the concepts I described to them when discussing this thesis project.

This project has the potential to not only encourage colleagues serving dying congregations, but also to give them a platform from which they can teach and encourage the rest of us as more and more congregations and church bodies are forced to face their mortality. They are the experts, the pioneers, and innovators who will lead the way into the next expression of church.

Every single beautiful, broken, vulnerable, and precious congregation across the state of Montana and across the globe is the beloved bride of Christ. Dying congregations are worthy of dignity, comfort, encouragement, and care.

Historical Sketch and Theoretical Lenses

My research was conducted in the Montana Synod of the ELCA. What follows is a brief description of the spiritual landscape of the state of Montana. I then introduce the two theoretical lenses being used in this research: *adaptive leadership* and *hospice*.

¹⁹ ELCA Research and Evaluation, “Montana Synod Data Kit,” 7.

The Montana Synod

Legend has it that when the early pioneers travelled by wagon train over the Rocky Mountains, they lost their church memberships along the trail and never went back to look for them.²⁰ It turns out that many of those membership certificates were lost somewhere in North Dakota, long before they made it to the mountains. Montana is situated in the Mountain West of the United States, a region that, along with the Pacific Northwest, is the least churchd region of the country. Sociologists Patricia Killen and Mark Silk have labeled the Pacific Northwest as “the None Zone,” because the box labeled “None” is one most frequently checked by people in this region when asked about religious affiliation.²¹

Montana has been described as “the last best place.”²² It is a vast, untamed, fragile land whose people find identity in the ability to adapt and survive drought, wildfire, oil barons, copper kings, and battles between Indigenous Peoples and American Settlers.

The spiritual ecosystem of Montana is as fragile and unforgiving as the land. Most of the congregations in Montana are in small, rural communities where populations are aging and shrinking. In the Montana Synod of the ELCA, forty-three out of 126 congregations reported thirty or fewer in weekly worship attendance in 2015.²³

Congregations located in more populated areas of the state also face challenges. A

²⁰ I think I first heard this joke from my grandpa.

²¹ Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

²² Mike Mansfield, “Why Montana Is the Last Best Place,” in *The Last Best Place* (Helena, MT: Falcon Press, 1992), 13–19.

²³ ELCA Research and Evaluation, “Montana Synod Data Kit,” 7–9.

century ago, Germans, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians all established Lutheran congregations in places like Missoula, Billings, and Great Falls. As these church bodies merged and consolidated over the decades, congregations that used to serve distinct cultural groups now compete for members.²⁴

Adaptive Leadership

Congregations in this changing, fragile, evolving spiritual landscape face new, complex challenges every day. *Adaptive leadership* as described by Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky²⁵ is an essential theoretical lens for this project. Patrick Keifert and others²⁶ have helpfully related this discipline to church leadership. Adaptive challenges are situations facing an organization for which there are no ready-made solutions, no outside experts who can supply easy fixes to the problem at hand.

Adaptive leaders look at the big picture of what is going on in the organization. They identify sources of tension and anxiety. They name the sacred cows and acknowledge conflicting values that come into play. Adaptive leaders then work to foster an environment in which members of the organization are motivated and equipped to engage with one another to discern a way forward, listening to the voices of every party.

²⁴ Heidi Emerson, *New Partners, Old Roots: A History of Merging Lutheran Churches in the Pacific Northwest, 1986* (Tacoma, WA: North Pacific District, American Lutheran Church, 1986).

²⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

²⁶ Patrick R. Keifert, *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon Publishing, 2006); Patrick R. Keifert and Nigel Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church: Creating Deep Cultural Change in Congregations* (Cambridge, MA: Grove Books, 2014); Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse, 2014).

For these reasons, adaptive leadership is a helpful approach for pastors of dying congregations with limited financial and human resources.

Hospice Principles

Hospice is a field of health care that specializes in providing dignity, comfort, and care to patients and families facing life-limiting circumstances. Congregations are living systems that are born, live, and die. They are populated by human beings who are born, live, and die. Just as every human facing the end of life has unique symptoms, needs, goals, and resources, so it is with congregations. For this reason, I have chosen hospice as my second theoretical lens.

The hospice team works together to create an environment in which the patient, the family, and caregivers can determine a plan of care that attempts to align most closely with the goals and priorities of the patient. Hospice care brings a sense of normalcy to the dying process and insists that all living things be treated with dignity and kindness, including (and especially) people at the end of life. Hospice provides education and language for the dying process that promotes dignity, comfort, and care for patients and their families. It is a holistic, practical approach to problem solving.

Hospice works with people dealing with bereavement and grief. As an end-of-life care program, hospice is well suited to address issues of grief as it is experienced by the patient and loved ones, including *anticipatory grief*, the experience of grief that occurs prior to and in anticipation of the terminal event itself.

Finally, hospice workers develop clear boundaries and ways to care for themselves and their own families. Every hospice patient dies eventually. Hospice

professionals and volunteers find alternative, internal ways to measure success, find meaning, and stay resilient.

My knowledge of hospice is primarily based on my eight years of experience as a hospice chaplain, during which time I educated and counseled hundreds of patients and their families about hospice care and the dying process. I trained and coordinated over seventy hospice volunteers to equip and enlist them to come alongside hospice patients, families, and health care professionals. Hospice philosophy and practice resources vary from state to state, but there are pamphlets, books, and websites related to basic hospice care.²⁷ Barbara Karnes has a booklet we shared with bereaving patients and families.²⁸ No discussion of grief and bereavement is complete without including the work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross and her stages of grief.²⁹

Biblical and Theological Lenses

In addition to these theoretical lenses, my research also utilized biblical and theological lenses to inform and interpret the impact of my AR intervention. Second Corinthians 4:1-18 addresses directly the issue of encouragement for ministry, so that is my first biblical lens. Meanwhile, Matthew 25:31-46 points to a radical ethic of caring for the most vulnerable in society. This is my second lens. Missional ecclesiology and the leadership of the Holy Spirit are my theological lenses.

²⁷ Pat Carver, *New Volunteer Orientation*, Hospice Volunteer Training Series (Richmond, CA: Carver Media, 2015); *Hospice Can Help: A Hospice Care Guide* (Naples, FL: Quality of Life Publishing Co, 2011); “What Is Hospice?” (Hospice Foundation of America), accessed September 25, 2017, <https://hospicefoundation.org/Hospice-Care/Hospice-Services>.

²⁸ Barbara Karnes, *The Eleventh Hour: A Caring Guideline for the Hours to Minutes before Death* (Vancouver, WA: BK Books, 2008).

²⁹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

2 Corinthians 4:1-18 We Do Not Lose Heart

The verse that captured the heart of this research project is my first biblical lens:

“Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1). Not long ago a colleague of mine recounted a conversation with a disgruntled long-time member of her congregation. “Why are other churches growing, and not ours, Pastor?” Pastors and congregations are anxious, frustrated, and perplexed.

Dwight Zscheile captures the angst of my colleague and many pastors today:

We watch the church’s vitality, relevance, and institutional strength erode before our eyes, and we feel responsible. We think that if we only worked harder, preached better, brought more energy, met people’s needs more, or found the right program or technique, things would turn around...Many church leaders I know are frustrated, bewildered, grieving, and anxious for their livelihoods, all for good reason.³⁰

The Apostle Paul writes his second letter to the church at Corinth at a time when his relationship with the congregation is strained and his leadership questioned. The Corinthians were anxious, frustrated, and perplexed. Paul defends his leadership on the basis of the mercy of God. Paul was serving God’s mission and at God’s behest. He was called by God to preach Christ (4:5) and embody the cross (4:10). Paul was just a vessel, a clay jar, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (4:7). “We do not lose heart,” says Paul, “for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory... so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen” (4:16-18).

³⁰ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 33.

Matthew 25:31-46 The Least of These

While Paul provides encouragement for church leaders who are feeling unsteady or discouraged, Jesus instructs his followers how to act toward the vulnerable and weak in their congregations and communities. Jesus identifies himself with the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned and the stranger as he tells the parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31-46. The king tells “the sheep” that they had fed him when he was hungry and visited him in prison, for whenever they had done these things for “the least of these,” they had done it for the king himself. Pastors and synodical staff thus honor God and more clearly reflect the image of God when they treat dying congregations with gentleness and tender care. To withhold care or compassion from “the least of these,” is unfaithful to the mission of God.

This dynamic of caring for the most vulnerable is not done in a vacuum. The world is watching how the church and its leaders treat its members. Sociologist Rodney Stark argues that the first century Christian church grew in part because pagans were attracted to this community that took care of its most vulnerable members.³¹ Missiologists David Bosch³² and Kosuke Koyama³³ further make the case that the vulnerability of the pastor, missionary, and congregation is cruciform and thus used by God to bring the gospel message to the world.

³¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

³² David J. Bosch, “The Vulnerability of Mission” (Lecture, 1991), https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bq/34-8_351.pdf.

³³ Kosuke Koyama, “Extend Hospitality to Strangers: A Missiology of Theologia Crucis,” *International Review of Mission* 82, no. 3 (1993): 283–95.

Theological Lenses

Hospice principles provide a framework for facing the adaptive challenges facing dying congregations. The Bible encourages leaders who are feeling vulnerable in and with vulnerable congregations. What remains are lenses to clarify the nature of the church and the leadership role played by the Holy Spirit in our congregations. These are my theological lenses.

Missional Church

Missional ecclesiology emerged in the twentieth century as Enlightenment assumptions about the authority and mission of the western Church were being called into question by new science, globalism, and the declining influence of the church in North America. Leading of the missional theologians include Darrell L. Guder,³⁴ David Bosch,³⁵ Lesslie Newbigin,³⁶ Craig Van Gelder,³⁷ Alan Roxburgh,³⁸ and Patrick Keifert.³⁹

The Apostle Paul says that he does not lose heart because his call to ministry was *through the mercy of God*. He came to understand that it was God's mission, God's

³⁴ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998).

³⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

³⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

³⁷ Craig Van Gelder, "Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 3, no. 1 & 2 (2004): 43–73.

³⁸ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

³⁹ Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church*.

church, and that Paul’s participation in that mission had more to do with the goodness of God than with the effectiveness of Paul. This insight is at the heart of *missional ecclesiology*. The church was created and is equipped to be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the future toward which God is moving. Christian congregations are comprised of people sent by God into the world to bear witness to the kingdom of God, what Daniel Erlander calls “God’s unfolding promise to mend the entire universe.”⁴⁰

Leadership of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit created, equips, and leads the church, and this is the basis for my second theological lens. Michael Welker,⁴¹ Dwight Zscheile,⁴² and Inagrace T. Dietterich⁴³ write about the person and power of the Holy Spirit in the world today, actively present and leading our congregations, including ones that are dying on the plains and main streets of Montana. From the earliest stories of the Bible to today, the Spirit consistently uses times of wilderness, exile, and grief to raise up leaders and form faith-filled communities. That same Spirit calls and raises up local leaders for the local church, leaders who know and are known by their community and context.

Finally, the Spirit forms, equips, and animates the church to function as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12). Every member of the body has a gift and purpose. Every congregation has exactly what the Spirit needs to accomplish the Spirit’s purpose.

⁴⁰ Daniel Erlander, *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God’s Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe* (Mercer Island, WA: Order of Saints Martin and Teresa, 1992), 3.

⁴¹ Michael Welker and John F. Hoffmeyer, *God the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

⁴² Zscheile, *The Agile Church*.

⁴³ Guder and Barrett, *Missional Church*. Dietterich is the contributing author of chapter six.

Bodies, like all living systems, grow old, break down, and die. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26a). No wonder congregations experience pain, grief, and loss! Still, the Holy Spirit is always making things new, calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying the church⁴⁴ to accomplish God’s will and mission.

IRB Standards and Ethical Considerations

This research project took measures to protect confidentiality. I received permission to name the synod in which the research took place. I used pseudonyms for individuals and specific locations within the state. Everyone who participated did so voluntarily. I made a donation to a charity in the name of my transcriber. Members of WDNLH 1.0 received meals and some mileage compensation, but otherwise no one received compensation for their involvement.

Access to research materials is limited to myself, my advisors, and the transcriber. She signed a confidentiality agreement. No names are included with the search conference responses. All electronic data are stored in password-protected files on my personal computer. Other research materials are stored in a locked file in my home office. After May 19, 2022, three years after graduation, the data will be destroyed. This project only sought participation and responses from those over the age of 18. Given the nature of this research, there is unlikely to be any negative effects to any special populations.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism: A Handbook of Basic Christian Instruction for the Family*. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 13.

Study Significance

There are many people who know a lot more about hospice than I do. There are many, many pastors who have more experience than I have with rural, remote congregations. This project engaged the two disciplines in a fresh dialogue, in hopes of finding ways to encourage, support, and instill confidence in pastors of dying congregations. I have attempted to reframe the conversation about our declining congregations across the state of Montana and across the country. I have identified the anxiety and isolation felt by many of my colleagues in remote areas and have attempted to create a forum for them to imagine how God was calling them to this ministry. The processes utilized in this research may offer local leaders some tools to help them not lose heart, and a platform from which they may be able to teach the rest of us how to face the future boldly.⁴⁵

In this chapter I have presented an overview of my research question, lenses, and methodology. In the next chapter I offer a more detailed historical sketch and an in-depth description of my theoretical lenses.

⁴⁵ The Montana Synod has identified five benchmarks of the mission of the church. The first of these is “to meet the future boldly.”

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL SKETCH AND THEORETICAL LENSES

The previous chapter was an overview of my research question, lenses, and methodology. This chapter briefly sketches the spiritual and physical geography of Montana and its people, including a history of the Montana Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The number of Lutherans and Lutheran congregations in Montana is declining. It is tempting to blame poorly trained clergy, stubborn church ladies, or out of touch synod staff. I want to change the conversation.

It is more helpful, I think, to understand congregations, pastors, and synod personnel as *living systems* that are facing *adaptive challenges* that threaten their health, vitality, and even survival. Some of these challenges can be met and overcome, and some cannot. When a challenge threatens to overwhelm, the language and philosophy of *hospice* care equips members of the system to treat one another with dignity, compassion, and respect. A dying congregation can access hospice principles to help it navigate grief and end-of-life choices. The second part of this chapter describes these theoretical lenses in more detail.

The Montana Synod

Rev. Paul Everett describes the formation of the first Norwegian Lutheran congregation in Montana in 1881. He introduces a group of Norwegian families who began to settle a stretch of land seventy-five miles outside of Bozeman, along Sweet Grass Creek:

As was usual in the Norwegian tradition, the settlers didn't wait for a pastor to practice their faith; they held Sunday school and devotional meetings nearly from the start. A

more permanent organization came in October 1885, when Rev. Peder I. Reinertsen was sent by the Home Mission Board of the Norwegian Augustana Synod. During his two-week visit, he conducted services in the school house, baptized children, administered Communion, and visited in homes. On October 26, 1885, Reinertsen met with the settlers at the Ellingson home and organized the first Lutheran congregation in Montana. A constitution was adopted and officers were elected.¹

This was the pattern of Lutheran church planting in Montana. Scandinavian Lutherans migrated to the United States and settled in rural areas across the Great Plains. Together, they practiced the faith and preserved their language and culture. Being Lutheran was understood as a fundamental part of their identity. When such a community became established, a sponsoring synod sent missionaries or professional clergy to organize a congregation formally, with officers and a constitution. Over one hundred Lutheran congregations had been established in the state by the end of World War I.²

Lutheran congregations in Montana emerged from their cultural isolation as the Great Depression gripped the United States in the 1930s. Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish liturgies gave way to English. Synods merged. By the 1960s, congregations in larger communities were giving birth to new church plants in growing sections of town. The three major Lutheran synods—the American Lutheran Church (ALC), Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC)—merged to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988.³ The Montana Synod is one of sixty-five geographical synods in the ELCA. The synod established its headquarters in Great Falls to serve and represent over one hundred-fifty congregations.

¹ Lawrence F Small, ed., *Religion in Montana: Pathways to the Present*, vol. 2 (Billings, MT: Rocky Mountain College, 1995), 88.

² Emerson, *New Partners, Old Roots*, 11.

³ Emerson, 14.

The spiritual landscape of Montana continues to change. There are currently 126 congregations affiliated with the ELCA in the Montana Synod, which today includes parts of northern Wyoming. Forty-three of those congregations now report a weekly average worship attendance of thirty or less.⁴ Twenty-seven congregations have closed, merged, or left the synod in the last fifteen years.⁵ A single congregation in the synod reported a weekly worship attendance of over three hundred in 2016.⁶

For nearly a century, communities in Montana could support and sustain local Lutheran congregations led by professional, highly educated clergy. These congregations preserved both culture and doctrine, as well as providing parents with resources and support to raise their children in the Christian faith. These faith communities cared for elderly members, married their young couples, baptized their children, and buried their dead. Church members gave their offerings and maintained buildings. Interchangeable pastors came and went, preached, taught, administered the sacraments and served as the chief ambassador of the congregation to the community.

Today, congregations in remote, rural areas currently struggle to find pastors, fill the pews, and maintain their aging, empty buildings. Congregations in larger population centers are also watching their congregations age and shrink in numbers. Lutheran congregations sharing the same zip code offer redundant worship styles and ministry opportunities to populations for

⁴ ELCA Research and Evaluation, “Montana Synod Data Kit.”

⁵ The synod had 153 congregations as recently as 2002. The ELCA’s decision in 2009 to allow for gay and lesbian ordination hit the Montana Synod hard. One colleague told me that, back in early 2010, on her first day on the job at a congregation in western Montana, thirty individuals tendered their resignations from the congregation, in direct response to the ELCA’s decision.

⁶ ELCA Research and Evaluation, “Montana Synod Data Kit.” A colleague in the Midwest recently took a new call to what he described as a “medium sized congregation.” That church saw five hundred worshipers in a given week. By his definition, every congregation in the Montana Synod would be considered *small*.

whom weekly worship attendance, hymnals, and committee meetings are neither compelling nor appealing. Simply put, Montana is running out of Scandinavian immigrants to populate its existing rural congregations. The Montana Synod lacks the funds, the resources, and the will to establish or support new congregations. Communities of faith cannot rely on, wait for, or afford ordained clergy. The spiritual landscape today is as much like 1881 as 1981.



Figure 2. Reservation Lutheran Church

A Spiritual Geography

*Oh Montana, give this child a home
Give him the love of a good family and a woman of his own
Give him a fire in his heart, give him a light in his eyes
Give him the wild wind for a brother and the wild Montana skies⁷*

The spirituality of Montana includes geography, language, theology, politics, denominational affiliation, and words. Some were born there and never leave. Some are captured by the beauty, the majesty, the isolation, and “the wild Montana skies.” Those who call Montana home would agree with Native American activist Helen Hunt Jackson, who reflected on her connection to the Rocky Mountains: “It was in the east that wise men saw the star. But it was westward to a high mountain, in a lonely place, that the disciples were led for the transfiguration.”⁸

Wildfires

Wildfires burned hundreds of thousands of acres of National Forest land in the summer of 2000. One rancher fought off the raging flames threatening to devour his home and property. The determined rancher held his ground, saved his home, and burned his lungs. Fifteen years later he was a hospice patient dying from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). His home, his life, and his death were shaped by wildfires.

Those wildfires transformed the local landscape. Hillsides once covered with tall green Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir years later appeared barren and brown from the valley below. Black stumps replaced tall evergreens. It was a discouraging sight when we first moved to the

⁷ John Denver, *Wild Montana Skies* (RCA Records, 1983).

⁸ Jan Shipps, Mark Silk, and Kathleen Flake, *Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West: Sacred Landscapes in Transition* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 140.

area. One day my wife and I decided to go hiking on one of those hill sides. What we found instead of a brown, barren wasteland was a hillside absolutely exploding with verdant life. The new plants and seedlings were everywhere grasping and battling for the sun's attention. The fallen, charred trees had become nurseries and fuel and shelter for new life. The forest lived on. We needed a close up view to see the new thing.

Poverty with a View

Montana is an odd blend of rugged individualism and desperate partnerships. The rancher/hospice patient fought the wildfires. His property was "saved" from the flames, but he lost his lungs. He boasted of his rugged individualism in the presence of a health care professional whose services were subsidized and regulated by the government. A popular bumper sticker reads: "Montana: Poverty with a View." Daniel Kemmis, former mayor of Missoula, writes about growing up in eastern Montana. His father needed to build a new barn. The whole town came out to help, including a neighbor whom his mother despised. The neighbor did not like her, either. They needed a barn to survive. The community needed to help each other in order to survive. The need for a barn and the need for cooperation for survival on the plains transcended personal differences.⁹

Montana claims a shared identity that transcends politics and distance. The next time you go to Montana, ask people if they are "from here." If they say yes, ask them to tell you what town. They may identify a place that is hundreds of miles away. If I am in Billings, and someone asks me if I am from here, the Montana response would be: "Yes, I live outside of Missoula." Missoula is 345 miles from Billings, a five-hour drive on Interstate 90. Montana, they say, is a

⁹ Daniel Kemmis, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 78.

small town with REALLY long streets. Former US Senator from Montana, Mike Mansfield, described the state as “the last best place:”

The state has picked itself up and started over many times. Its history is of a people drawn from many sources, headed toward the glowing promise of the Western Frontier. It is a people who have known the collapse of hope and the renewal of hope... The history of Montana is the song of a people who, repeatedly shattered, have held together, persevered, and, at last, taken enduring root.¹⁰

The spiritual landscape of Montana, like the physical landscape, is changing and fragile and always on the verge of collapse. Empty, boarded up white church buildings dot the landscape like the black burned out stumps on the hillsides. The view closer up shows that there is plenty of spiritual energy and growth happening across the state. Like the fragile, drought-prone, physical geography, it may be that the spiritual ecosystem in Montana simply cannot sustain the organized, denominationally recognized, professionally led congregational model of ministry as its primary expression of God’s church. The people of God in Montana will find a way to come together in crisis and reinvent and rebuild the church, with or without a building; with or without a pastor. Some congregations in Montana will hold their ground, no matter what. Others will retreat, regroup, come together, and rebuild. “The history of Montana is the song of a people who, repeatedly shattered, have held together, persevered, and, at last, taken enduring root.” We are all from here, after all.

Adaptive Leadership

The choices and challenges pastors and congregations face in the Montana Synod require *adaptive leadership*. To this day, pastors and synod staff look at the decline in worship attendance, financial stability, and community influence in the congregation and assume that this

¹⁰ Mansfield, “Why Montana Is the Last Best Place,” 17.

is a problem that both *needs* to be fixed and *can* be fixed. There is a tendency to see these issues as technical problems. A technical problem has a solution. The job of the leader is to find out what the answer is and implement the solution. Margaret Wheatley describes this approach:

We diagnose the problem; we expect to find a simple, singular cause for our woes. We sift through all the possible causes of failure, searching for that one broken part—a bad manager, a dysfunctional team, a poor business unit. To repair the organization, all we need to do is replace the faulty part and gear back up to operate at predetermined performance levels.¹¹

The limitation of this approach is that not every problem has a simple solution.

Organizations are *living systems* that are made up of human beings, values, resources, and countless relationships and interactions between people, cultures, and experiences.

Congregations are living systems with complex, adaptive challenges. Dying congregations in the Montana Synod face issues for which there are no quick fixes and easy ways out. Dying congregations cannot simply “try harder” to not die. These congregations are susceptible to the snake oil salesman who is selling the latest revival technique or evangelism fad.¹²

The Adaptive Challenge of Dying Congregations

Some of us engaged in ministry are starting to question the technical approach to the changing church. Rev. Anna Olson, an Episcopal priest in Los Angeles, has written about adaptive leadership as the spiritual leader of a dying congregations. She spent the first decade of her ministry trying to rescue her congregation from institutional failure. She read all the books and went to all the conferences. Her congregational leaders wrote mission statements and crafted

¹¹ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006), 138.

¹² A recent ELCA mission developer’s conference featured an inner city “dance church,” which hosted street dancers who used the church building to house their dance competitions, listening to the pastor’s message before the final “dance off.” A very cool ministry for Harlem, New York, but not Harlem, Montana. Yes, there is a town in Montana named Harlem, with a population of 800.

strategic plans. She had “some pretty good ideas,” and her congregations were comprised of gifted, motivated people. Despite their efforts, her congregations did not grow. Nothing worked. They struggled, declined in number, and kept getting older.

They were fighting a losing battle. She and her congregations were peddling a product that fewer and fewer people wanted. Finally, she suggested to her congregation that they give up. Instead of trying to prop up the institution, she invited them to put their energy toward being the church. Her congregation faced an adaptive challenge.

If our churches cease striving to be full and flush, we can strive to be places where we and our neighbors practice welcome and being welcomed, forgiving and being forgiven, loved and being loved. We can live fully in whatever time we have left, claiming our place in the sacred story of death and resurrection...In short, we can be who we were always meant to be.¹³

Olson then describes the journey she and her congregation began together. She helped them see themselves as part of the larger story of God. They agreed to try small ministry experiments together, letting go of out-of-date programs and expectations. They engaged with the neighborhood. They engaged with scripture and spiritual practices. They adopted the motto: *Don't be afraid to look stupid!*¹⁴

Like Olson's congregation in Los Angeles, Lutheran congregations across Montana and across the nation wonder what the future holds. Adaptive leaders help organizations discern what problems can be fixed, and what challenges are best seen as invitations to give up and look stupid for Jesus.

¹³ Anna B. Olson, *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom beyond Survival* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 2016), 4.

¹⁴ Olson, 50.

Six Habits of Highly Effective Adaptive Leaders

Distinguishing between technical problems and adaptive challenges is the first task of an adaptive leader. Heifetz and Linsky identify six key behaviors needed for adaptive leaders to effectively address adaptive challenges in an organization. Leaders first need to *get on the balcony* and see the big picture of what is going on in the organization. Second, the leader needs *to identify an adaptive challenge* and help people understand that technical solutions are insufficient. Signs of an adaptive challenge include competing values, sacred cows, unwritten rules, and hidden agendas. I served a congregation once that said they wanted to welcome more children to worship, but then complained about the noise when a young family showed up. This was an adaptive challenge because there were competing values in play. People wanted to have children in worship, but they also valued a peaceful sanctuary.

The third task of adaptive leadership is to *regulate distress*: gauge the anxiety levels of the organization and create a “holding tank”—a safe environment in which people in the organization can address the challenge facing them. The leader controls the thermostat, so to speak, raising the temperature (urgency) high enough to get people to address the challenge, but low enough (calm) to allow for helpful discussion and thoughtful discernment.

Fourth, the adaptive leader must *maintain disciplined attention* on the matter at hand to keep the congregation focused and directed. Rev. Olson led her congregation through a long process of discernment, discipleship, dialog with the neighborhood, and experimentation. It required focused leadership to keep the congregation on track.

The last two practices of the adaptive leader have to do with *giving the work back to the people*, and making sure that *every voice is heard*. “This is your work,” says the adaptive leader to the organization, “how do you think you want to handle it?”¹⁵

There may be no greater adaptive challenge faced by a living system than a life-limiting disease or condition. Hospice specializes in helping patients and families adapt to the changes and challenges they face at end of life.

Hospice: Dignity, Comfort, Caring

Hospice is a field of health care that specializes in providing dignity, comfort, and care to individuals and families that are facing life-limiting circumstances. For eight years I worked as a chaplain and volunteer coordinator at a small hospice service in western Montana. Hospice is an end-of-life, palliative care program. A person is eligible for hospice care if he or she has a *terminal disease*, that is, a serious health condition which a doctor has determined will likely lead to a natural death within six months. This is what makes it an *end-of-life* program. The other qualification is that the patient and family agree to the principles of hospice: that the goal of care is not to cure the disease, but to alleviate suffering and maximize the patient’s quality of life. This is what makes hospice a *palliative care* program. Hospice care is just as aggressive as any curative form of medical care. The difference is that the goal is not *curing* the disease, but rather *caring* for the patient. A successful hospice intervention is one in which the patient and family enter the last days or months of life with dignity, comfort, and support.

¹⁵ Peter Guy Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 7th Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016), 267–71.

Managing Anxiety

One day I was visiting a patient in the hospice center who had a diagnosis of terminal cancer. I had spent several visits with her, and we had formed a fairly strong connection. This morning she was having a bad day. She was agitated and anxious. When I walked in, she skipped the niceties and blurted out: “Pastor, all of this is just too much. I just know that God is punishing me!” I took my friend by the hand. “Wow,” I said, “what did you do wrong?”

My response startled her. “Well, nothing!” she replied.

“Then [this cancer] is probably not God punishing you,” I declared with a grin. I met her eye and squeezed her hand. She exhaled. Her shoulders relaxed. We spent the next half hour talking about life, the universe, and everything. Our visit ended with scripture and a prayer for God to grant strength and comfort for the days ahead. My unexpected, playful question had helped her break out of the cycle of fear, and moved her into a better place to face her future.

This is an example of the practice of being a *non-anxious presence*. It is the ability to lower the emotional temperature in the room through a calm demeanor, gentle humor, human touch, and quiet command. Lowering anxiety in patients and their loved ones has a dual benefit. First, it improves capacity for decision-making. Second, most pain medications are more effective when the patient is calm. Chaplains cannot prescribe medicine or make decisions for people, but by addressing the anxiety level in a system, we make the pain medications more effective, which reduces suffering. Chaplains help people make better decisions for their care.

Normalizing the Dying Process

Most people have never died before. A successful hospice intervention normalizes the death process for a patient and family. The dying process introduces changes in the patient’s appearance and behavior. The changes can be upsetting and alarming to many family members. I

often offered assurances to patients and their loved ones that what they were seeing was a normal part of dying.

Every death is unique, but for most hospice patients—those coming to the end of a battle with cancer, dementia, or lung or heart disease—the changes to the body, to relationships, to the mind, and to the spirit are fairly predictable. Eating patterns change. People tend to withdraw from social networks. People need more sleep. They lose weight. The body experiences fluctuations in temperature. The face hollows. Fingers turn purple, skin gets blotchy. People often see visions and hear voices. Once people stop drinking water, the death event is likely a matter of days, not weeks. At the very end, breathing can become raspy and sporadic. Often a patient has one last surge of energy or clarity a day or two before death occurs. The last senses to go away are touch and hearing. Then the breathing stops. This is the end of life.¹⁶

The nurse checks for a pulse, the rising or lowering of the chest, movement in fingers or toes, or for other signs of life. Finding none, the nurse declares the time of death. When I was asked to come to the room, I would thank the family for their good work and for the privilege of serving their loved one. I then would place my hand on the deceased's forehead: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace. Amen* (Leviticus 6:7).

Human Dignity

“River Ron” was a well-known homeless member of the community. He lived under the bridge north of town. The hospital had provided him medical care for years. When doctors determined that Ron had a terminal condition, he came to live at the hospice center. We took

¹⁶ Karnes, *The Eleventh Hour*.

care of Ron for over a year. The hospital covered the costs of his care. Every person matters. The hospital would not turn a person away who needed medical attention.

Health care has wisely avoided the slippery slope of trying to determine which people deserve to live and which do not. In hospice philosophy, patients have inherent value simply because they exist. Our society has decided that the value of a life transcends abilities and utility. Hospice promotes human dignity through the language used for end-of-life conversations. We never used the phrase: *pulling the plug*, for instance. The patient is a human being; not a toaster. During my time as a hospice chaplain, I heard dozens of stories of families that found the end-of-life process to be a time of healing and reconciliation. Adult children told me how meaningful it was for them to be able to give back to their mothers the nurture they had received growing up. Patients described the growth and peace they discovered while being cared for and treated with dignity under hospice services.

Wholistic, Team Approach

Hospice interventions are a team effort. Regulations required our staff to gather every two weeks for an Interdisciplinary Team Meeting (IDT). The medical director, pharmacist, department head, social worker, volunteer coordinator, chaplain, bath aide, and clinical nurses spent two hours every other Wednesday morning talking about each patient in our census.¹⁷ We discussed the patient's plan of care and pain management. We talked about the dynamics going on among family members, spiritual issues, and personality conflicts. We reviewed conversations from the previous week about patient goals and fears. We identified spiritual

¹⁷ Our typical daily census ranged from fifteen to twenty-five patients.

distress and physical needs. Each of us had a piece of the puzzle, and as a team, our job was to put the puzzle together, and devise interventions that would best meet the needs of the family.

The IDT meeting ended with time spent reviewing the cases and patients who had died in the previous two weeks. Team members could share stories about the death event, the family, or a meaningful interaction with the patient. Sometimes we would recognize a seam or gap in our care coverage and discuss how to improve our level of care for the next patient. At the end of this discussion, I led a moment of silence remembering those patients and families. I thanked each member of the staff for their good work.

The team approach also provided a mutual accountability and support. All the members of the team were expected to do their job. If a nurse did not complete the paperwork in a timely fashion, the program did not get reimbursed, and the survival of the service was at risk. Team members also supported each other. Hospice care is emotionally draining. Patients die every day, sometimes literally. When a nurse had nineteen of his patients die in the first three weeks of December, the other nurses took his on-call schedule through the holidays so he could get some rest and recharge his emotional batteries.

Grief

A final component of the hospice lens is grief. Bereavement services are a significant element of hospice care and as the chaplain I dedicated much of my time and energy to leading bereavement groups; counseling staff, patients, and families; planning and officiating funerals; and calling families members of patients in the days and months that followed the death.

Bereavement, by the way, is the state or condition of having experienced a loss. *Grief* is the

emotional response to the pain of loss. *Mourning* refers to “the effortful responses one makes to manage grief.”¹⁸

Grieving is natural, normal, necessary, and really hard. Grief is “the healing process of the heart, soul, and mind; it is the path that returns us to wholeness.”¹⁹ Dying people can experience *anticipatory grief*. As the term suggests, this is the emotional response to the pain of a future or anticipated loss. People experiencing grief often manifest physical symptoms like difficulty concentrating, trouble remembering things, or disruption in eating or sleeping patterns. The emotional effects of grief can include feelings of frustration, anger, guilt, and shame.²⁰ Everyone seems to experience and express grief differently, and at their own pace. I would often remind families that there was no right or wrong way to grieve.

Everyone experiences loss. The Bible says: “blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). When people acknowledge and honor their grief through rituals and time and tears, people experience the healing that grief brings. Those who mourn are comforted.

I learned to ask the question: *What is hardest for you right now?* This allowed the dying or the bereaved to identify the sources of fear and loss and uncertainty. A family of an agitated and anxious elderly patient was convinced that he was worried about his salvation. The rest of the family had always gone to church, but he had not. He had not even been baptized. I asked him one day what was causing him so much anxiety. He told me his fear was that his decreasing

¹⁸ Charles A. Corr, “Anticipatory Grief and Mourning,” in *Beyond Kubler-Ross: New Perspectives on Death, Dying, and Grief* (Washington DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 2011), 22.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, David Kessler, and Maria Shriver, *On Grief & Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2014), 229.

²⁰ *When You Are Grieving: A Guide to Understanding Loss* (Naples, FL: Quality of Life Publishing Co, 2013), 4–6.

capacity to talk would prevent him from being able to say what he needed to say to his wife. I grabbed a pen and paper and invited him to dictate a letter. I wrote down his sweet declaration of gratitude for her and their life together. When I read it back to him, he nodded and seemed to relax.

Later that afternoon I gave the letter to his wife and told her how I had come to write it. She teared up when she read it, went to the bedside and embraced her husband, reaffirming her love. The main source of fear had been addressed. One week later the wife found me to tell me that her husband had agreed to be baptized. She asked me if I would do the honors. On Christmas Day, surrounded by his family, I baptized him in the hospice center dining room. He died on Good Friday.

Summary

In this chapter I have sketched the spiritual and physical landscape of Montana and congregations of the Montana Synod. As these congregations face adaptive challenges, uncertain changes, and feelings of grief and loss, the theoretical insights of adaptive leadership and hospice principles may be helpful for pastors and synodical staff seeking to come alongside these dying congregations. The next chapter presents my biblical lenses: 2 Corinthians 4:1-18 and Matthew 25: 31-45; and my theological lenses, which are missional ecclesiology and the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LENSES

Adaptive leadership and hospice care offer two theoretical perspectives for pastors serving in the dying congregations of the Montana Synod. Dying is an adaptive challenge, after all. This chapter brings the Bible and our Christian tradition into the conversation. Both theoretical lenses acknowledge how important it is for leaders to maintain boundaries and manage their anxiety. My first biblical lens is 2 Corinthians 4:1-18, where the Apostle Paul wrestles with issues of anxiety and encouragement in leadership. My second biblical lens, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25: 31-45, presents an ethic of caring for the most vulnerable in society.

My theological lenses round out the conversation. Missional ecclesiology, based on passages like 2 Corinthians 4, invites the church to see itself as a clay jar holding the treasure of the gospel, not the gospel itself. The church itself is led by none other the Holy Spirit: the Spirit of Jesus Christ who creates, leads, and equips local leaders and congregations to be the sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God.

2 Corinthians 4: We Do Not Lose Heart

“Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, *we do not lose heart.*” 2 Corinthians 4:1). This verse provides a biblical basis for missional leadership in dying congregations. This section looks at the context of this passage, then reviews key themes: the

mercy of God, the nature of ministry, and the encouragement Paul has received in times of hardship or struggle.

Second Corinthians

The Book of Acts records that the Apostle Paul went to the city of Corinth as part of his second missionary journey. He lived and preached in Corinth for about eighteen months “teaching them the word of God” (Acts 18:11). This was around 51-52 CE. Paul kept correspondence with the Corinthians after he left. Scholars debate about how many letters he wrote to them and whether 2 Corinthians is a single letter or a compilation of several of his letters. This paper assumes that 2 Corinthians is a single letter Paul wrote to the churches at Corinth, about five years after he left, in 57 CE. Paul was probably residing in Macedonia at the time.¹

It appears that some in Corinth were challenging Paul’s leadership and integrity. Some people there were resentful of the stern tone in his first letter. New leaders now presented a more popular prosperity gospel that promised healing and wealth for the faithful. Paul wanted to reassert his leadership and influence. He also wanted to solicit funds from the Corinthians and bring the offerings to those in Jerusalem who needed it (2 Corinthians 8-9).

The result is a highly emotional and transparent letter. He openly admits his struggles and distress. He recounts the “troubles” he experienced in the province of Asia (2 Corinthians 1:8a). These troubles had been used by the prosperity preachers to discredit the apostle. Paul, however, turns the argument around. “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 548–51.

happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:8b-9). In times of great struggle and suffering, during times in the wilderness, through crises and thin places, Christians come to experience more fully the mercy of God. Paul returns to this theme again and again.²

The Mercy of God

“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8 NRSV). Grace and mercy are two sides of the same coin. Grace (“abounding in steadfast love”) alludes to divine provision and blessing that is given freely. Mercy (“slow to anger”) refers more to divine restraint freely offered: God withholds just punishment for sins. Grace is when you get what you do not deserve. Mercy is when you do not get what you deserve.³ Mercy is both an attribute of God and something God requires of human beings.⁴ Walter Bauer says that the sense of the word *mercy* in 2 Corinthians 4:1 is to *receive as a gracious gift, be favored with*.⁵ It is worth asking what Paul is *receiving as a gracious gift* as he engages in ministry for the sake of the gospel. In Romans, God’s mercy is expressed in the salvation of the Gentiles (Romans 11:30-31). Paul’s own salvation—he who formerly persecuted the church—is an illustration of the mercy of God in 1 Timothy.

I wonder if Paul embraces the mercy of God as the basis for his ministry in part to set himself apart from his opponents. The prosperity preachers in Corinth had *charisma*—divine

² 1:12; 2:2-4; 3:5; 4:1, 7, 12, 16-17; 5:7, 17; 6:4; 7:5; 8:2, 9; 10:13; 11:7, 30; 12:5-10; 13:4

³ Jody Davis, Peter Furler, and Steve Taylor, *Real Good Thing* (Star Song Communications, 1994).

⁴ Mark Allan Powell and Barry L. Bandstra, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011), 624.

⁵ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and Felix Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 249.

gifts they pointed to as evidence of God's grace and favor. Paul wants to stay far away from contests to decide who is the most spiritual or important. His ministry is through the mercy of God. Everyone falls short. Everyone struggles. Everyone fails. Everyone dies. These are the times that God *mercies* us. In place of condemnation, God grants mercy: acceptance, comfort, and encouragement. The mercy of God is the power through which Paul experiences transformation "into [the Lord's] image with every increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Jesus revealed the mercy of God when he died on the cross and was raised from the dead. Paul now embraces his own suffering as participation in Christ's suffering:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you (2 Corinthians 4:10-12).

The mercy of God ensures that everyone will see very clearly that God is the treasure, not Paul. God is the one who raises the dead. God forgives sin. God is reconciling all things to himself through Jesus Christ. God is the deliverer, the One who says Yes (2 Corinthians 1:19); the Father of compassion who comforts us in all our troubles (2 Corinthians 1:4); whose grace is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul is clear: "our competence comes from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). Paul has his ministry through the mercy of God.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:18, 20). As ambassadors, Paul says, "we preach...not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

It is a ministry of presence more than preaching. "From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16). This ministry is a life submerged in the mercy of

God, patterned after the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus, learning to see the world and other people the way God sees them. “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in us” (2 Corinthians 4:10).

Furthermore, Paul knows that he is not unique in his calling, nor is he alone. This ministry he has been given he shares with others. The true church includes all those called by the Spirit to suffer and embody the gospel of Jesus Christ. To this day, leaders in the church can say with Paul: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (4:8-9).

Jars of Clay

“We have this treasure in jars of clay,” Paul says, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (4:7). The church is the container, not the thing itself. Biblical commentator R. C. H. Lensky thinks that Paul used the language of clay jars to underscore the temporary, throw-away nature of the church. Jars of clay are cheap, utterly common, the least valued, and bound to break sooner or later. The treasure of inestimable value is in us as vessels, and God uses us as ministers for the operation of this wondrous power.⁶

Here Paul pushes back at the prosperity gospel preachers. We are clay jars, says Paul, and bound to break sooner or later. Stop pursuing wealth, comfort, or spiritual satisfaction. Stop pretending to be a big deal (2 Corinthians 4:2a). You and your pursuit of power and success are getting in the way of the message. Renounce secret and shameful ways and stop distorting the word of God (2 Corinthians 4:2b). Bear the death of Christ in your bodies, so that the life of Christ might be revealed to the world. Christ is making his appeal through us, so get out of his

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Pub. House; Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1963), 976.

way! Fix your eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Therefore, We Do Not Lose Heart

The phrase: *therefore, we do not lose heart* appears two times in 2 Corinthians 4. To “lose heart” is to become discouraged or to give up. The prophet Isaiah announces that “those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31). Similarly, Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow to show his disciples that they “should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). If the nature of ministry is suffering, those engaged in the work of the church must understand the source and basis for hope and perseverance. Hospice nurses cannot measure success by whether or not the patients get better, like nurses in other fields of medicine can. In order to not lose heart, nurses gauge whether or not they acted with compassion and professionalism, whether they alleviated suffering, whether the patient was treated with dignity. In the same way, Paul has to redefine success.

The first source of encouragement is based on the source of the call. It is God’s mission, and God will accomplish God’s mission according to God’s plan and purpose. The pressure is off. The faithful leader in the church has been called into that role by the mercy of God (2 Corinthians 4:1). The second reason leaders need not lose heart involves the goal of the mission itself and the impact the ministry has for the good: “the grace of God [is] reaching more and more people [and causing] thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:15). There is an internal, personal impact as well, an “inward renewal” and the achievement of “an eternal glory.” Encouragement does not come from wealth, success, or accolades. “We fix our

eyes not on what is seen but on what is unseen” (2 Corinthians 4:15-18). Therefore, we do not lose heart (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Matthew 25:31-46: The Least of These

The parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) serves as my second biblical lens. Jesus calls on his followers to care for the most vulnerable in society as though Christ himself was the one receiving their acts of compassion. This ethic of love and service proved to be a compelling witness to outsiders who watched the first century Christians risk their lives in service to plague-infested pagan households.

Sheep and Goats

The scene is judgment day, and the people are all brought before the king and separated into two groups, Team Sheep and Team Goat. The king congratulates Team Sheep and invites them to come and share in his eternal blessings:

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me (Matthew 25:35-36).

This declaration causes some puzzled expressions within the crowd. The group shuffles and scratches their collective head. Finally, one earnest fellow raises his hand and pipes up: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The king explains that “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (25:37-40).

The scene then quickly switches to the other group, Team Goat. The king sends them away from his presence, cursed, and destined for eternal fire: “I was hungry and you gave me

nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me” (25:41-43).

This group also seems surprised and confused. A very earnest woman in the crowd clears her throat and asks for clarification: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?” The king replies, “truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me” (25:44-45). The story ends on a sobering note: “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (25:46).

This parable often makes people a bit uncomfortable. Those being judged are unaware of their actions, good or bad. The ones who served the poor did so unwittingly. The ones who did not show compassion are unaware of the fact. It is hard to earn salvation if I do not know the score. We are saved by grace through faith, apart from works of the law (Romans 3, Galatians 2). We are not supposed to keep score. Robert Capon argues that this parable is about trusting Jesus. Do not try to keep score. Trust Jesus in all things, live by the Spirit, and then do not be too surprised to find out that throughout your life you encounter God in all sorts of unexpected places and people.⁷

Ministering to the Least of These

What is at the heart of this parable is the mandate to show compassion to and to care for the most vulnerable in society. At Nazareth Jesus opens the scroll to Isaiah 61 and announces that “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the

⁷ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2002), 511.

poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free..." (Luke 4:18). He tells his hometown congregation that "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). The early church continued in his footsteps. The first followers shared everything they had so that there were no needy people among them (Acts 4:32, 34). Paul taught generous giving to support the poorer churches (2 Corinthians 8-9). James wrote that looking after orphans and widows is a mark of authentic religious pursuit (James 1:27).

This emphasis is not a new teaching of the God of Israel. The Old Testament is also replete with admonitions to care for the vulnerable in society as well. Moses instructed the people of God not to mistreat or oppress a foreigner and not to take advantage of orphans and widows (Exodus 22:21-22). The psalmist affirmed this, telling us to "defend the weak and fatherless, uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:3-4). These words were echoed by the prophets, including Isaiah, who proclaimed: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

You Did It for Me

The new thing in this teaching is that Jesus says that every act of service to the vulnerable in society is an act of service to Jesus himself: "whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (25:40). Conversely, every time an act of service is not performed for the sake of a vulnerable member of society, it is a failure, a refusal, a missed opportunity to serve Jesus: "whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (25:45). Christ is locating himself in and among the people on the fringes. God is hanging out with sinners and tax collectors (Luke 5:29), out past the edges, in the most

unexpected places and people. God's Spirit dwells in every person, because every person is made in the image and likeness of God. I encounter the Spirit of Christ in my neighbor, even as my neighbor encounters the Spirit of Christ in me. We are to love our neighbor and serve those in need because Jesus did, and told us to do likewise. We grow in Christlikeness when we serve others. We serve Christ when we serve the most vulnerable in our society.

See How They Love One Another

The rest of the world notices when Christians love the poor. Sociologist Rodney Stark attributes much of the early growth of the church to this ethic of caring for the vulnerable. The revolutionary idea of this first century church was that God loves humanity, and that Christians should, too.⁸ When plagues came into a Roman town in the first and second centuries, the Christians stayed while the pagans fled. The Christians took care of the sick—both Christian and pagan—and as a result more people survived. Non-Christian neighbors were grateful and amazed. Christian courage and compassion were compelling and attractive.⁹

Both Paul and Jesus point to a church whose actions speak louder than words. Participate in the sufferings of Jesus. Minister to those who are most vulnerable, and there you will find God. The purpose of the church is to point to God's healing, saving, reconciling activity. My theological lenses, missional ecclesiology and the leadership of the Holy Spirit, explore these ideas in more depth.

⁸ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 86.

⁹ Stark, 73-94.

Missional Ecclesiology

Missional ecclesiology refers to the nature and purpose of the people created, sent, and equipped to tell the world that God is doing some good stuff. Missional theologians attempt to place the focus of the gospel message on the activity of God, rather than the activities of the church. As the Apostle Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 4:7, the church—the people of God—is a clay jar that holds the inestimable treasure that is the power of Christ Jesus reconciling all things to God. God is on a mission to restore and heal creation, and the church is an instrument and witness of the mission of God: *missio Dei*.¹⁰

Jesus began his ministry announcing God’s dream and intention for creation. “The time has come: the kingdom of God¹¹ has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). He anticipated the day when the last would be first and the first would bring up the rear (Matthew 20:16). Mary’s song, the Magnificat, sings of the day when the mighty are brought low and the humble are lifted up (Luke 1:52).

The prophet Isaiah pointed to the year of the LORD’s favor (Isaiah 61:1-2) and prophesied the day when the wolf would live with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6). Joel linked this future with God pouring out the Spirit on all people. “Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29). This time of *shalom* would be a new era when Israel’s enemies would be subdued, all debts cancelled (Leviticus 25:13), and all of creation living in harmony.

¹⁰ Guder and Barrett, *Missional Church*, 4–5.

¹¹ The masculine, patriarchal connotations of the term kingdom of God make this phrase less than appealing for many in the current context. In this paper, I attempt to utilize parallel concepts to convey the best sense of this word, such as “shalom,” “reign,” and “God’s unfolding promise to mend the entire universe.”

The reign of God is envisioned in the New Testament as the redemption and reconciliation of people and all creation (Colossians 1:19-20), life restored to how everything is supposed to be (Revelation 22:4-5), and the realignment of life around God and God's ways.¹² Daniel Erlander calls it *God's unfolding promise to mend the entire universe*.¹³

What the Missional Church Is

Missional theology recognizes that the church has been created, established, and sent into the world to announce, serve, and further the mission of God. The church is not the sender of missionaries, but the one sent. The church is not a building, place, or event. The Augsburg Confession states that the church is "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."¹⁴ Composer Jay Beech captures the nature of the church as a community of faith and action: The church, it is the people living out their lives/ Called, enlightened, sanctified for the work of Jesus Christ!¹⁵

Lesslie Newbigin summarized missional understanding of the purpose for which the church was created and sent, saying that the church is a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God.¹⁶ It is worth taking some time to describe in more detail what it means that the church is a *sign, instrument, and foretaste* of God's unfolding promise.

¹² Alan J. Roxburgh, M. Scott Boren, and Mark Priddy, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 101–2.

¹³ Erlander, *Manna and Mercy*, 3.

¹⁴ Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 32.

¹⁵ Jay Beech, *The Church Song* (Baytone Music, 1988).

¹⁶ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 136.

Sign

A sign is not the thing itself: it points to or labels the thing. A signpost on the highway tells me that I am forty-two miles from Missoula. The sign outside the building of my church facility has “Faith Lutheran Church” written on it. Signs label or point to the thing but are not the thing itself. As the people of God, living together in community, the church has been sent into the world to be a sign of the kingdom, to label and point to the unfolding promise of God. The church is a *watched* and *peculiar* people, a *contrast society*, “the unique community of those who live under the reign of God... a harbinger of the new humanity.”¹⁷ “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14, 16).

Reservation Lutheran Church wrestled with the question of if and why it should keep the doors open. We had eight to ten people in worship on a good Sunday. After what felt like the umpteenth broken window, the congregation had decided to give up hosting the community foodbank. Offerings were slowly declining, and my call was reduced from one-quarter time to one-eighth time. I told the congregation that I enjoyed the call to serve as their pastor, but they were not obligated to keep my position funded. I was proud of them, I told them, and I supported whatever decision they made.

The people of Reservation Lutheran made the choice: they would stay open for as long as they could, in order to be a light to a community devastated by arson, suicide, addiction, and unemployment. They would be a sign to the community that Jesus Christ was Lord of the

¹⁷ Guder and Barrett, *Missional Church*, 103.

Reservation. The chosen and sent people of God would be a sign of the dogged, hidden, vulnerable, and faithful presence of God in that community.¹⁸

Instrument

The church, as a sign, points to God's mission. The church, as an *instrument*, announces and articulates God's mission. The church is sent to be the messenger, herald, and ambassador of this unfolding promise. "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5). "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Just as the sign points to the thing, but is not the thing itself, the worship service and the sermon are instruments of the reign of God, but not the thing itself.

My seminary professor, Gerhard Forde, insisted that theology is for proclamation.¹⁹ The church proclaims the God of Jesus Christ, the God of scripture, the God who created us, loves us, and has a purpose for our lives. Someone has to tell the story, after all: "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14).

I officiated more than one hundred funerals while serving as the hospice chaplain. The local funeral directors knew that they could call me on short notice to officiate services for families who had no local church affiliation. As a result, it was a funeral for someone I had never met. My role as chaplain and officiant was to proclaim the love of God in Jesus Christ through

¹⁸ Reservation Lutheran continues to serve its community as a light and sign of God's love. Retired pastors, lay preachers, and LPAs now fill the pulpit and administer the sacraments.

¹⁹ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

my presence,²⁰ my words, and my actions. Whether in the pulpit or the coffee house, whether at the bedside or the graveside, the preacher of the gospel is an instrument of God, the one who makes it known that the promise of God is *for you*.

Foretaste

The church is sent to be a sign of God's emerging reign so that the world can see it. The church is sent to announce the good news to the world so that the world can hear it. The third calling of the sent people of God is to be a foretaste of the coming shalom of God, so that the world can taste it, touch it, and experience it for themselves. "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do it for me" (Matthew 25:40). When the people of God love their enemies, their enemies catch a whiff, a taste of God's love.

This evening, scrolling through the YouTube App on my phone, I came across half a dozen teasers for upcoming movies. A teaser compiles the most interesting two minutes of the feature film, introducing us to its stars; taking us to glamorous locations; and introducing us to the basic plot of the story.

The church is sent to be a kingdom teaser, a foretaste of the feast to come. The church introduces the main character, Jesus Christ, by doing the things Jesus did. We *portray* the gospel. We act out the promised future reality of God. The people of God go to exotic locations, like dining room tables, soup kitchens, and hospice centers, to reveal and discover the presence of God in the most ordinary and most vulnerable neighbor. The church shows a glimpse of the plot—the unfolding promise of God to mend the entire universe—through a cup of cold water, a

²⁰ Treat the bereaved with dignity and professionalism; remember the name of the deceased; demonstrate genuine compassion and empathy; take the time to meet with the family and plan the service; show up for the service on time; include some detail about the deceased in the service, greeting, or message so that it feels "personalized."

kind word, a prayer shawl, or a home cooked meal. These acts of service are not the promise itself, but they provide a peek, a taste, a whiff of the actual mission of God, and why a person might want to buy a ticket and see it for themselves. “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46).

God has a mission and created the church to serve that mission: to be an instrument, sign, and foretaste of the unfolding promise of shalom. The church is the people called, enlightened, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. How the Spirit leads the church today is my second theological lens.

The Leadership of the Holy Spirit

I memorized the Small Catechism in confirmation class as an eighth grader in Kingsburg, California. My dad, the pastor, taught the catechism to Mike, Charlotte, and me every Wednesday afternoon that school year. There is a phrase in Luther’s explanation of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed that intrigued me back then and still does to this day:

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.²¹

It was the Holy Spirit that led me follow in the footsteps of my dad (and later, my mom) and become a pastor. At seminary I described myself as a “third article Christian” to emphasize my reliance on the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Spirit became even more palpable during my first pastorate, when the Spirit stirred up the congregation to treat us with remarkable kindness, patience, and generosity. The people of God there carried my wife and me through a

²¹ Luther, *The Small Catechism*, 14.

difficult pregnancy. We came to understand that if everyone could experience the kind of supernatural love and care we received during that time, it would change the world.

The Holy Spirit is active in the world today to bring about the promised shalom of God. The Spirit creates, sends, and leads the church to participate in and witness to the *missio Dei*. A consideration of the leadership of the Holy Spirit is my second and final theological lens. The leadership of the Holy Spirit leads by teaching in the wilderness, sending out missionaries, and equipping God's people for ministry in service to the *missio Dei*.

Wilderness Training

Wilderness School is the term Daniel Erlander uses in *Manna and Mercy* to describe the forty-year journey from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. During that time, the people of God learned the way of Yahweh, the way of manna and mercy. Erlander believes that the people were there to learn that everything belongs to God and that all that they have is a gift. God's gift of manna in the wilderness taught Israel that there is enough for everyone; hoarding is both unnecessary and unproductive; the work we are given is to help God distribute manna to everyone; and Sabbath is the gift that teaches us to rest and trust.²²

Jesus attended the Holy Spirit Wilderness Academy a thousand years later. Luke writes that, following baptism, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil...When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit..." (Luke 4:1-2, 13-14).

²² Erlander, *Manna and Mercy*, 9.

The Spirit continues to use the circumstances of life to teach and mold the character of the people of God to teach us the providence of God and conform to the image and likeness of God. There are no short cuts through the wilderness, or exile, or hardships, as Dwight Zscheile reminds us, because it is precisely in the ambiguity and uncertainty of the wilderness that we learn we cannot do it ourselves, that we must depend on God, and that there is a way that leads to and reflects God's desire.²³

One of the hardest disciplines for me is to resist the desire to shorten the time in the wilderness and make the journey easier, both for myself and for others. In the pursuit to relieve suffering in a dying patient, it is tempting to hasten the dying process. When I am in the middle of a difficult season, I would rather run away from it than learn from it. Yet the wilderness times are priceless. That difficult pregnancy was a wilderness time for my family. I would not wish it on anyone else, and I would not trade the experience for anything. Hospice likewise taught me that the end of life is a wilderness time, a thin place, a lonely journey. The moments and days waiting and watching the loved one in the hospital bed are times of grieving and healing and grace. Even after dying people slip into unconsciousness, I have come to imagine that their wilderness time continues. God is showing them what they need to see, teaching them what they need to know. Maybe they need to be unconscious to experience it. The Holy Spirit leads and protects, provides what we need, and teaches us to rest in the mercy of God.

Sent

A survey of the Old Testament shows the Spirit of God regularly being *poured out* and *stirred up*. The Spirit *rests upon* a person who then leads the people of God to the promised land,

²³ Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 41.

to victory over their enemies, or to a greater understanding of God's activity.²⁴ God raised up judges who were from families whose names were familiar: Othniel was "the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother" (Judges 3:9); Deborah was "the wife of Lappidoth" (Judges 4:4); Gideon was the kid from the tribe of Manasseh (Judges 6:15); and Samson was one of those Danites (Judges 13:2). The first kings, Saul and David, were selected from local families. God raised up prophets, from Elijah to Jeremiah, to speak the word of God to their own people.

The pattern continues in the New Testament. Laying the groundwork for the coming of Christ, the Spirit comes to and fills a local couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, with a prophecy, a pregnancy, a song, and a silence (Luke 1). Jesus himself is "full of the Spirit...[and] led by the Spirit" (Luke 4:1) into the wilderness, then was "in the power of the Spirit" when he returned to Galilee (Luke 4:14). At Nazareth he announces that "the Spirit of the Lord is on me" and had sent him to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus then called and taught local fishermen and tradesmen to be his disciples and apostles. The Apostle Paul and other early missionaries of the church trusted the Holy Spirit to raise up indigenous leaders to receive the apostles' teaching and guide the new outposts of the Christian faith.²⁵

Equipped

The Spirit guides the people of God through the wilderness and provides them with manna: everything they need to function and thrive as a community. The Spirit pours itself into local leaders who manifest the power of God and carry out the Spirit's mission. The story of

²⁴ Welker and Hoffmeyer, *God the Spirit*, 142.

²⁵ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours: A Study of the Church in the Four Provinces* (London: World Dominion Press, 1927), 83.

Pentecost and the letters of Paul show that the Spirit possesses and is possessed by every member of the community of faith. The Apostle Paul describes the church as “the body of Christ,” with each person endowed with unique and intentional spiritual gifts, designed to build up the whole and help the church carry out its purpose, the same way the parts of a body work together to function as a whole.

Now about the gifts of the Spirit... There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them... Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it (1 Corinthians 12:1, 4, 7, 11, 27).

I have often used 1 Corinthians 12 to teach the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the uniqueness, importance, and giftedness of each member of the church. I give the new member class each a piece of paper and crayons, then invite them to draw what “body part” they are in the Body of Christ. As people draw and explain their “body part,” they then tape it onto the wall with the other participants’ body parts. Invariably, the body of Christ is fleshed out with eyes and hands and hearts and feet—along with the occasional appendix, pituitary gland, and hangnail. This is what the body of Christ looks like in this group, I tell them. Then I invite them to imagine the whole congregation, the whole Christian Church on earth, as the body of Christ, strategically placed with unique and vital gifts for the building up of the whole.

Hospice chaplaincy and ministry in dying congregations brought to light for me Paul’s insistence that “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Corinthians 12:22). A person facing a life-threatening condition is a precious child of God and has much to teach me. Aging, dying congregations are weak, and they can no longer do some of the things they used to do. They no longer have the people, resources, or energy to put on the annual Christmas program or weekly Sunday School. Yet these churches are indispensable. “You are the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27). You are beautiful, complete, and enough.

Summary

Writing down these thoughts about leadership in the missional church, I feel both a sense of excitement and caution. This is a scary wilderness. The grief and loss these congregation members are experiencing cannot be overstated. At the same time, God is doing something new, and out on the edges, some of us get to see early glimpses of what is coming next.

I have presented theoretical, theological, and biblical lenses that lay the framework for my research question: *How might an action research (AR) intervention impact missional leaders of dying congregations?* Adaptive leadership and hospice principles underscore the fact that congregations are autonomous living systems. Some of these congregations are coming to a natural end of their existence; that is, they are dying. Pastors are called to come alongside these people to cultivate environments in which the people and the mission of God can thrive to the very end. Missional theology teaches that the church is created and sent by God to represent the unfolding promise of shalom. The Bible commands us to love our neighbor and care for the most vulnerable, for in so doing we love and worship God, and our hearts are increasingly formed in God's image and likeness. As we serve and love, we are bound to get rattled, cracked, bruised, and broken. We are jars of clay in which the treasure of God dwells, so that we always remember that the gospel has its source, not in us, but in the one who makes all things new.

God has a mission, and for that mission God is still creating the church to serve that mission. As more and more traditionally structured congregations see death and decline, it may very well be that God is creating and forming a new expression of the church. My research intervention is with pastors of dying congregations because this is the wilderness in which the Spirit is teaching us to rely on the providence and power of God. The Spirit is raising up these local leaders to carry out God's mission and inspire others to do the same. These communities of

faith exist through the mercy of God. To pastors and leaders of these congregations, Jesus says “whatever you do to the least of these, you do it for me.” The next chapter describes pragmatic AR in more detail and offers a detailed description of my research design.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Congregations across Montana are facing mortality. Pastors and synod staff often feel discouraged, isolated, and overwhelmed. I have introduced theoretical, theological, and biblical lenses for considering ministry in the context of the mercy and mission of God; to view vulnerability and compassion as God's preferred method of revelation; and to embrace the language of death and grief in order to address the needs and fears of their congregations. This chapter describes *pragmatic* action research (AR) methodology and my research design.

Pragmatic Action Research (AR)

How might an action research (AR) intervention impact missional leaders of dying congregations? AR is a generally accepted form of social science research that allows the researcher to be a part of the research and to use the intervention to improve the function or state of the system being studied. Specifically, I chose to design a *pragmatic* AR intervention. Two books informed my understanding of pragmatic AR: *The Search Conference*, by Merrelyn Emery and Ronald E. Purser;¹ and *Introduction to Action Research*, by Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin.² Central to pragmatic AR methodology are four key concepts: pragmatic worldview, scientific research, General Systems Theory (GST), and a democratic process.

¹ Emery and Purser, *The Search Conference*.

² Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*.

Pragmatic Worldview

Pragmatism as a worldview was championed by early twentieth century philosopher John Dewey. Pragmatism emphasizes problem solving, assumes a fluid understanding of what is real, and recognizes multiple perspectives on any given situation.³ This worldview assumes that any kind of objective truth can only be known through subjective and limited means. We exist in a world of competing, conflicting, and often hidden values and goals. Pragmatism is not the same as relativism, because there is an appeal to the greater good. A pragmatic AR intervention pursues and generates knowledge to improve the system and move toward a more positive future. The value of a theory or idea is based on how effectively it contributes to positive change.⁴ Thought cannot and should not be separated from action. An idea is only true or good if it affects a change for the good.

Scientific Research

Pragmatic AR is scientific research that recognizes and embraces the collaborative and subjective nature of scientific inquiry.⁵ Scientific knowledge is not a fixed entity but rather an ongoing conversation. It is in a constant state of transition, and never exhaustive. Science involves making choices that are related to the researcher's individual preferences, insights, and intuition. The process is shaped by the researcher's resources, funds, and time available. Scientific method is a process that necessarily and beneficially involves such messy things as human judgment, creativity, and social interaction. "Scientists live in a socially complex world,

³ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 232.

⁴ Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*, 62.

⁵ Greenwood and Levin, 86.

chasing dynamic phenomena with limited and imperfect instruments and finite energies and budgets.”⁶

General Systems Theory (GST)

Another key tenet of pragmatic AR is *General Systems Theory* (GST), also known as open systems theory. The world as an interaction of multiple systems, relationships, and groups. Relationships and interactions between units and systems are observed more than the individual, isolated units. Each part is connected to other parts and cannot be understood independent of those relationships. A pragmatic AR intervention pays attention to how the system interacts with its environment, and how parts of the system relate to one another.⁷

Democracy

The fourth key component of pragmatic AR is *democracy*, defined by Dewey as “faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience.”⁸ Democracy in this sense is not consensus building or simple majority rule. It is giving each person a place at the table. Those who make the plan are responsible for implementing the plan. Pragmatic AR is convinced that the people of any organization are both capable and best suited to do the planning and work deemed necessary to contribute to the common good. Therefore, AR seeks to create an environment in which responsibility for control and coordination is located at the level where the work is taking place. The purpose of any AR

⁶ Greenwood and Levin, 57.

⁷ Emery and Purser, *The Search Conference*, 83.

⁸ Emery and Purser, 97. The authors mistakenly attribute this quote to “James Dewey.”

project is to generate new knowledge that creates change and empowers its participants for further pursuit of new knowledge.

Pragmatic Action Research in Context

Hospice interventions are a form of pragmatic AR interventions. The goal is to contribute to the dignity and comfort of the patient and family. The approach is pragmatic and scientifically based. The interventions are limited by finite time, resources, and knowledge. Attention is given to the entire family system, not just the patient or the disease. The patient articulates health care priorities. Family members and hospice providers also have a voice. The plan of care is compiled by a team, and every member of the team helps implement the plan.

Missional, pastoral leadership in a congregational setting also involves pragmatic interventions. The goal is to further the kingdom of God and participate in God's mission in that context. Every member of the congregation has a voice and a responsibility to identify and implement an action plan that is aligned with the mission. No part of the ministry is favored or ignored. Every ministry is limited by gifts, time, and energy. Best practices are studied and encouraged, but the plan of action focuses on doing the right thing, not necessarily doing things right.

Search Conference

The pragmatic AR intervention I used is a variation of a method known as the *search conference*. The key to a search conference, and why it is ideal for AR, is that those who see the needs in the organization are the same people who propose and implement the responses to those needs.⁹

⁹ Emery and Purser, 108.

A typical search conference convenes twenty to thirty-five key people from an organization for a two or three-day event, addressing a specific question or issue facing the organization. As participants gather, the leaders make sure everyone knows the purpose of the meeting, and that each person's involvement is valued and critical for success. The first step in the search conference process is to invite participants to scan the environment. On easel pads and white boards, every person identifies and writes down what they see going on in the world around them and around the organization. The next step is to focus on the system—the organization—its culture and mission, its shared history, and its current trajectory. Finally, the group is invited to imagine the preferred future for the system, and then is given the space and time to identify steps that can be taken by that group to effect positive change and move the organization toward that preferred future. The group identifies tasks, assigns responsibilities, and sets goals. Participants leave the search conference with the authority and responsibility to implement the plan.

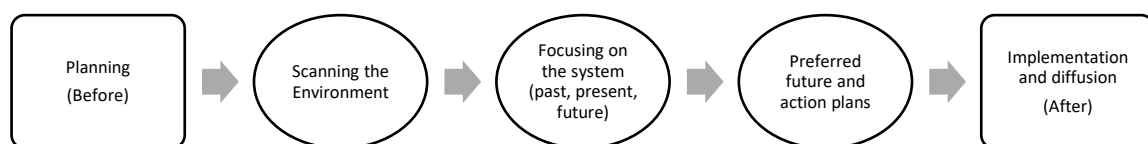


Figure 3. Search Conference Overview¹⁰

¹⁰ Emery and Purser, 13.

Missional Search Conference

The search conference is a method to gather a group of stakeholders in an organization to wonder and work together toward a shared and preferred future. My research required an adaptation of this method that allowed the Holy Spirit to take center stage and for God's word and mission to inform the process throughout. My research model might best be termed a *missional search conference* (see figure 4). It is a search conference that acknowledges the leadership of the Holy Spirit, gives the Bible a primary role in the conversations, and seeks to align the preferred future with the *missio Dei*.

A missional search conference gathers twenty to thirty-five stakeholders from the organization, congregation, or ministry to address a specific issue pertinent to the group. It begins with acknowledging the presence and mercy of God. I have used 2 Corinthians 4:1-18 as the text for the practice of Dwelling in the Word. The daily office or other worship may be included in the conference. In conversation with the scripture and each other, the group is asked to share openly and in writing what they see going on in the world. This establishes trust because it establishes a shared experience of reality.

The second question invites observations of our ministry context. Trusting that God is actively engaged in God's mission, this conversation focuses on what the group sees God doing in and through the church. People can recall what God has done in the past and look honestly at the current trajectory of the organization. This leads to a discussion about what might be God's preferred future, and why the ministry has been entrusted to this group at this time. The rest of the missional search conference creates an environment in which members of the group can make plans for how to move the organization closer to that envisioned future.

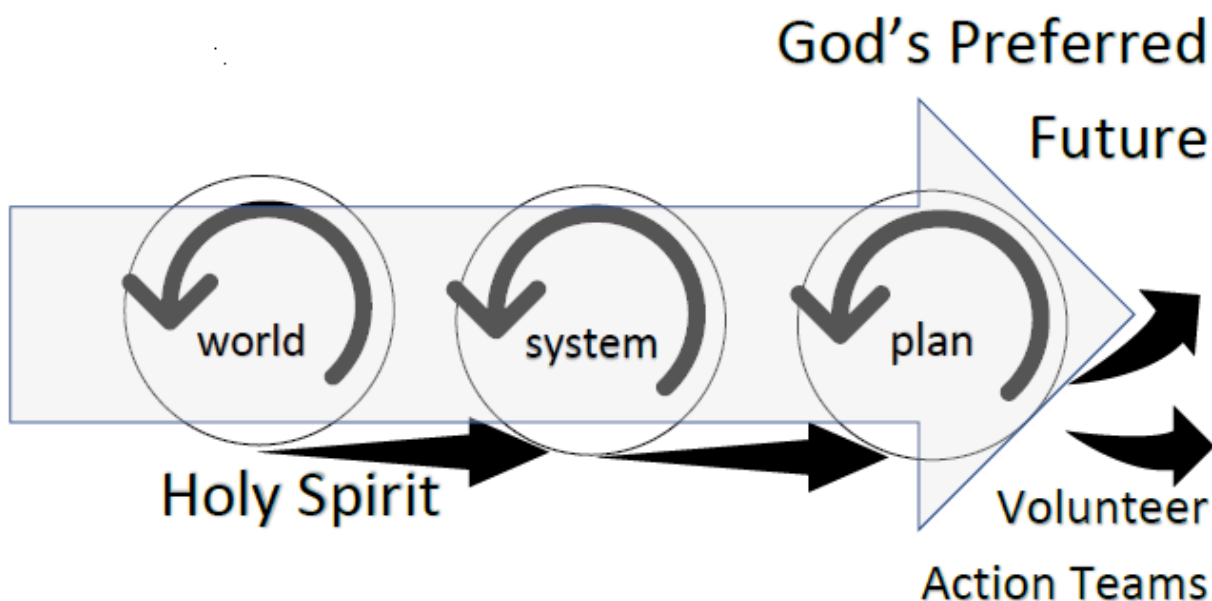


Figure 4. Missional Search Conference

These elements are interconnected, fluid, and not necessarily sequential. They lead to a plan for small steps that can be taken to improve the organization consistent with its stated goals and mission. One or more action teams are then formed from the group to enact the plan. This is what took place in the course of my research project and design, which I describe in detail in chapter five.

Action Research is Biblically and Theologically Grounded

Pragmatic AR methodology is consistent with the biblical tradition. Christian theologian Letty Russell promotes pragmatic democratic principles when she writes that all people deserve “a place at the table” and should be given the opportunity to participate in shaping their present and future.¹¹ The prophet Joel anticipates the day when the Holy Spirit is poured out on all

¹¹ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 57.

people (Joel 2) and this is realized in the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. The Apostle Paul asserts that as disciples offer their bodies as living sacrifices, they gain knowledge, what Paul calls a “renewing of the mind” (Romans 12:1-2). He insists that every member of the body of Christ has value and purpose, and that parts of the body that are believed to be unimportant are vital to the health of the whole (1 Corinthians 12). My research model includes practices that are explicitly Christian, including Bible study, prayer, and public worship. Having reviewed my methodology and method in general, what follows is the design of this particular research intervention.

Research Design: We Do Not Lose Heart (WDLNH)

My research used a transformative mixed method design to impact missional leadership in dying congregations. The very nature of a pragmatic AR intervention creates a dynamic that makes this mixed method design also transformative. It is designed to improve the organization and further its mission. My independent variables include primary and secondary interventions. The original search conference (WDLNH 1.0) served as the primary intervention. Secondary interventions included readings and reflections and monthly conference calls.

The planning and implementation of the second conference, WDLNH 2.0, was the outcome of the original WDLNH conference and should thus be understood as a secondary intervention in this project. With the original group (WDLNH 1.0) I measured the impact of the intervention on each participant’s morale and encouragement in ministry. I tracked the impact of the WDLNH 2.0 intervention on the confidence, support, and encouragement reported by those participants. Their reported sense of confidence, support, and encouragement for ministry were the dependent variables.

My research design takes into consideration a significant intervening variable as well. In the middle of the research window, two weeks before WDNLH 2.0, I moved out of state to start a new job.

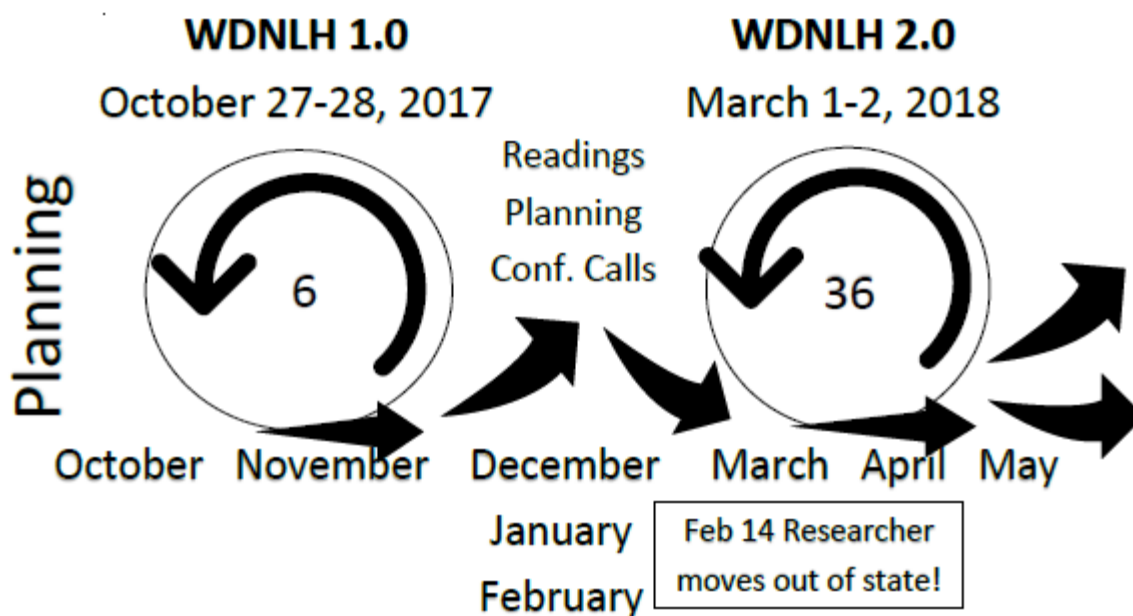


Figure 5. Research Design

My research window was from October 2017 through April 2018. In October I designed my research and selected a team of five participants. Prior to the research intervention I administered a baseline questionnaire to measure their feelings of support, confidence, and encouragement in ministry. These data would be paired with an end line questionnaire to be administered before June 1, 2018, at the close of the research window. At the end of October, I conducted the initial missional search conference: WDNLH 1.0. I collected qualitative data by audio recording and by taking notes of the search conference itself.

The participants of WDNLH 1.0 identified the need for more encouragement of pastors and LPAs in the Montana Synod. The group decided to schedule and lead a second search

conference for other leaders in the Montana Synod: WDNLH 2.0. Each team member volunteered to contribute to the project by taking on specific roles and responsibilities. I met monthly with the group via video conference calls to discuss logistics and planning. During this time, I also provided the cohort with monthly readings related to adaptive leadership, hospice principles, grief and bereavement, and missional theology. I asked for brief reflection responses to those readings and we discussed the readings as part of our monthly video conferencing. Two weeks before WDNLH 2.0 I left Montana to take a new call in western Washington.

The WDNLH 2.0 conference took place in early March, attended by thirty-six people. I again collected notes from the workshop leaders and from our large group discussions for qualitative data. I administered brief baseline questionnaires to the participants at the beginning of the conference, and a corresponding end line questionnaire at the conclusion of the event. I maintained regular monthly contact with the original cohort and with project leaders from WDNLH 2.0 through the end of May. At that point I administered an end line questionnaire to members of the original research group.

Participants

Five colleagues—ordained, ELCA pastors rostered and serving in ministries in the Montana Synod—were selected to participate in the primary research intervention, the WDNLH 1.0 search conference. It was a purposive sample: two males and three females with a range of ages and ministry experience. The small size of the group was unusual for a search conference but made the research more manageable, promoted a strong connection between participants, and simplified logistics.

My first volunteer was a colleague I had known for some time who expressed early interest in the project. This pastor had a colleague in her cluster whom she thought would be a

good fit for this cohort. It happened to be a young pastor I had worked with several years earlier during her internship. Next, I reached out to a long-time colleague who had served in both large and small congregations. The fourth participant recently took a position in the synod office and recognized this project as germane to her new job responsibilities. The final member of the group was invited on the recommendation of the synod office. He had attended an earlier meeting about small and dying churches that I had convened the year prior. A sixth participant, a younger, male, first-call pastor, at first accepted an invitation to participate, but informed me a week prior to the intervention that he would not be able to participate.

Instruments

I collected qualitative and quantitative data in parallel, analyzed the data separately, then merged my findings together. To gather quantitative data, I administered baseline and end line questionnaires to the search conference participants (see appendix B). This questionnaire was field tested by several ELCA colleagues in my cluster who were not part of the search conference. I received their feedback and tweaked the questionnaire eventually used for this project. Shorter versions of the baseline and end line questionnaires were administered to participants of the WDNLH 2.0 Conference. These questionnaires were field tested by local colleagues not involved in the conference (see appendix H).

Qualitative data were collected in the form of notes recorded on easel pads. Some of the notes were written down by me during the group discussion. For some discussions a member of the cohort was selected to be the notetaker. There were also times when each member of the group was given a pen and asked to write their ideas on the easel pads themselves. I recorded the original search conference by means of a digital audio recording and had this transcribed for later reference. Group members also submitted written reflections based on assigned readings. These

were collected and reviewed for trends and key concepts. Baseline and end line questionnaires invited open comments from participants. These easel pads were photographed and stored digitally. The original easel pads were kept on file for reference.

Process for Analysis

This research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of its interventions with pastors of dying congregations. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS software. I reported descriptive statistics using sample (N), frequency, percentage, and mean. I conducted paired t-tests with the quantitative data collected from the baseline and end line questionnaires administered with both the original search conference group and the WDNLH 2.0 conference participants.

The pragmatic AR principle of democracy insists that the knowledge generated by the participants has equal or greater relevance than observations made by the researcher. For this reason I used easel pads for public note-taking and allowed the group to self-record and self-code. The participants themselves determined the significant insights and themes that emerged from our conversation. They identified the *missio Dei* and devised an action plan for staging WDNLH 2.0. These notes were brought into conversation with other qualitative data collected, including the open comments collected on baseline and end line questionnaires; written reflections based on the readings; and personal notes and journal entries based on conference calls and other personal communications.

Ethical Considerations

IRB standards were upheld throughout the research project. Participation was strictly voluntary. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and for names and descriptions of cities, places, and congregations. All participants signed and received copies of informed consent forms (see appendix G). Access to research materials is limited to myself, my advisors, and my

transcriber. She also signed and received a copy of a letter of confidentiality (see appendix D). All electronic data are stored in password-protected files on my personal computer. Other research materials are stored in a locked file in my home office. These materials are securely stored until May 19, 2022, after which time they will be destroyed.

This chapter has reviewed my research methodology. The next chapter presents the results of my research and offers interpretation of the data.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The previous chapter included an explanation of the methodology, method, and design of my research interventions. The findings, data, and results of my research are the focus of this chapter. It includes both qualitative and quantitative findings and a comparison and analysis of the findings. The chapter concludes with some interpretation of these data.

Research Process

Congregations are dying. Leaders are discouraged. We have this ministry through God's mercy. These factors led me to consider this research question: *How might an action research (AR) intervention impact missional leaders of dying congregations?*

I designed and implemented a pragmatic AR intervention for this research and measured its effect on the morale of five church leaders working in very small, dying congregations in the Montana Synod. A secondary intervention followed the missional search conference method of the primary intervention and measured the impact of the conference on the confidence, support, and encouragement felt by its thirty-six participants. These attendees were pastors and Lay Pastoral Associates (LPAs) in the Montana Synod. I label the original search conference: *WDNLH 1.0*. The second search conference is identified as *WDNLH 2.0*.

Original Search Conference: *WDNLH 1.0*

I brought together five pastoral colleagues from across the state for a *missional search conference* to reflect on our shared environment, God's present activity and preferred future for

the church in Montana, and how God was inviting the group to participate in the *missio Dei*. The data from the search conference were collected by means of easel pads and a digital audio recording device. Easel pads notes were used to record the ideas and comments of the cohort. The group itself identified key learnings and themes, and, based on the knowledge generated by the search conference, set out a goal and action plan for conducting a synodical learning event the following spring. The audio recording was transcribed and analyzed for the purpose of noticing if there were key themes introduced but not pursued by the group.

Table 1. Participants (WDNLH 1.0)

Participant	Gender	Year of Birth	Year of Ordination	Ministry Context
Beverly	Female	1955	2012	Single parish
John	Male	1952	1979	Single parish
Emily	Female	1986	2015	Single parish
Joseph	Male	1948	1994	Multi-point
Paula	Female	1957	1989	Synod Staff
(researcher)	Male	1967	1993	Multi-point

Secondary Interventions

In the months that followed the original search conference, the group committed to sharing monthly readings and reflections. We also stayed connected through a monthly conference call. Each member of the cohort had also agreed to take on responsibilities for planning and leading the synodical learning event. The group communicated with one another as needed through email and phone calls. The monthly conference call included updates on logistics, problem solving, and planning for the event. This original cohort met for lunch following the learning event, and then one final time a month later at another synodical event.

Baseline and end line questionnaires were administered to the five participants using Google Forms to measure the impact of these interventions. SPSS software¹ was used to analyze the data by comparing the means using paired t-tests.

WDNLH 1.0 October 27-28, 2017, Lewistown, Montana

On October 27 and 28, 2017, I met with five colleagues from across the Montana Synod of the ELCA for a search conference. By bringing this cohort together, I believed that we could find common ground, identify the work of the Holy Spirit in our contexts, and devise and implement a plan to contribute toward a preferred future. This was a purposive sampling. Counting myself, three of us were male; three were female. Two participants had been ordained in the ELCA less than ten years. Three participants were nearing or considering retirement from active parish ministry. Three of us were serving congregations in urban settings.² Three of us were serving multiple-point calls (see table 1). What follows is a narrative of our conversation (see appendix C).

Connections and Contexts

All six of us were pastors serving in the context of dying congregations in the Montana Synod. I had planned this conference to piggyback on another synod function, so my cohort had already spent the day in church meetings. A Thrivent Action Grant³ meant that I was able to treat the group to dinner, during which time we had a chance to relax and connect. After the meal, we

¹ IBM, *SPSS*.

² “Urban Montana” may be an oxymoron. Two of us served congregations in Great Falls, population 59,000, and one in Missoula, whose population is approximately 70,000. They are the third and second largest cities in the state. United States Census (2017).

³ <https://www.thrivent.com/making-a-difference/living-generously/thrivent-action-teams/>

reassembled in our meeting room, where I reviewed the schedule for the remainder of our time. Each person was then given five minutes to describe their faith journey, call to ministry, and current ministry context. This conversation revealed common ground and shared experiences as a group. Each of us articulated a deep love for living and working in Montana: its geography, its people, and its way of life.

We then engaged in the exercise of *Dwelling in the Word*⁴ with 2 Corinthians 4:1-18 as our text. Several resonated with the encouragement articulated by the Apostle Paul that this ministry is from God and through God's mercy. Others were reminded of the depth of the goodness and faithfulness of God to us and to our congregations. Noting the language of clay jars in the passage, my friend John declared that "God accomplishes what God needs to accomplish through us, in spite of [our fragility]."

What in the World Is Going On?

To scan the environment in which we conduct our ministries, I invited the group to discuss the question: *What in the world is going on?* The tenor of the ensuing discussion betrayed feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the direction of American politics and global climate changes. The group voiced concerns about violence, *America First* politics, global warming, rising health care costs, and heightened societal fear and anger. Wanting the conversation to go broader, I invited the group to consider positive changes and growth being experienced these days. The group identified improvements in global health, increased cooperation and awareness between diverse groups, the *#MeToo* movement, and the flourishing arts.

⁴ Church Innovations, "Dwelling in the Word," accessed March 11, 2017, http://www.elca.org/en/Future-Direction/The-Process/Dwelling?_ga=1.81143831.1668599598.1452966834.

What Do We Think God Is Doing?

Having scanned the environment, we turned our attention to consider what we perceived God to be doing in and through our congregations and through the larger Church. Our congregations shared many similarities. One congregation was an eighty-year old Swedish church. Another was described as having been planted 112 years ago by Norwegians. Still another congregation was a century old, started by Danish settlers. In addition, we shared the struggles facing our congregations to stay open. Members are aging, populations are shrinking. Young families are rare, and for most of them, “active” means they attend maybe once a month. Our buildings are in good shape (with one exception), but under-utilized: “Our building has four Sunday School classrooms and we don’t use any of them!” As pastors, we are both appreciated and treated with some resistance. Some churches have received significant financial gifts to provide financial security, others are on the verge of running out of money. Like the state of Montana, our congregations experience a boom or bust economy.

This conversation about God’s activity in our congregations was a positive, hopeful reflection on the acts of love and service performed regularly by our people, both locally and around the world. God’s mission is being furthered when God’s people are being the hands and heart of Christ. Members of the group consistently pointed to ministries in their congregations that served people in need: quilting, prayer, food banks, community meals, caring for each other, burying our dead.

Why Us?

The group was getting tired after the long day. I was about ready to pause the conversation until the next morning, when the conversation took its first unexpected turn. Someone drew attention to a question that had been posed but not discussed: *Why do you think*

that has God given US this ministry? The cohort member wondered if *us* meant this group or if it meant our congregations or the synod or larger Church. We decided that the answer was: YES! Beverly noticed that each one of us had talked about our work with grief and loss, professionally and/or personally. One participant had worked as a chaplain for a burn unit at a Montana hospital. Another noted her interest in death and dying as a young seminarian, and how she built trust in her congregation in part through how well she did funerals. Three participants had cared for family members through significant health crises and loss. Three of us had some experience working as health care chaplains. We wondered what that might mean for how God was calling us as a cohort. After an extended session, we concluded the evening session until morning.

I reflected on our conversation overnight and added a slide for our morning session titled: *We Have This Ministry: Why Us?* I listed what I had heard as common threads that united us as a group. I included: Grief Experts, *Pastor-preneurs*,⁵ Artists, Oddballs,⁶ Sense of Humor, and Deep Sense of Call. This list resonated with the group and helped us lead into the discussion of how it might be that our group could work together to affect positive change in step with God's preferred future.

Action Plan: WDNLH 2.0

That led to a brainstorming session about how this group could work together for positive change in our system, that is, the Montana Synod. I expected them to work on an advocacy or intervention at the synod level. What emerged instead was a desire to invite colleagues from across the state to convene a larger search conference centered around 2 Corinthians 4, with

⁵ Dave Browning, *Deliberate Simplicity: How the Church Does More by Doing Less* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 147. Entrepreneurial pastors are willing to try things, start things, and think outside the box.

⁶ One participant thought that this should be at the top of the list.

workshops and worship available to equip and encourage these leaders in their contexts. By the end of our Saturday morning session, we had determined to plan and conduct an event for pastors and leaders of congregations who were “facing transitions.” With support and funding from the synod, we would invite colleagues from the Montana Synod back to Lewistown on March 1-2, 2018, for a two-day learning event for pastors and LPAs serving in small congregations in transition.

Emily volunteered to work on publicity and worship. Paula would coordinate with the synod, plan venue logistics, and secure additional funding. Beverly and Joseph agreed to lead a workshop about leading through change and anticipatory grief. John pledged to facilitate a conversation about short-term strategic planning. The group urged me to conduct a search conference similar to this one, including the time of *Dwelling in the Word* centered on 2 Corinthians 4. We divided into pairs to complete the agreed upon tasks. We pledged to take time during our monthly conference call to report to one another the progress being made by each team.

Secondary Interventions

The group met via conference call on a monthly basis from November through February. The cohort was given reading materials reflecting the theoretical, theological, and biblical lenses of this project (see table 2). They were asked to write reflections and participate in a monthly conference call. In November the group was asked to read materials related to hospice care and grief work.⁷ One cohort member noted in her written response that she found herself envious of the network of support enjoyed by those under hospice care: “You’ve got people!” She lamented

⁷ Karnes, *The Eleventh Hour*.

the isolation she and her colleagues in dying congregations often experience. Another participant admired the assessment process involved in hospice care and wondered what kind of process could be used by pastors and synods to assess the specific needs of a dying congregation.

Table 2. Readings and Reflections (WDNLH 1.0)

Month	Reading	Conversation Topic
November	<i>Hospice Can Help; Eleventh Hour</i>	Hospice Philosophy, Grief
December	<i>Tales of the Pointless People</i>	Vulnerability of Leadership
January	<i>Forming the Missional Church</i>	Missional Principles
February		Logistics for WDNLH 2.0

December’s reading was a playful look at our vulnerability as leaders. We spent our conference call reviewing the author’s tales of “pointless people.” The devil tempts us to keep score and to measure our worth based on how many points we score in life. Erlander suggests that God created us to be “pointless people” instead. We were created to enjoy God’s creation, take care of it, and take care of each other.⁸ We talked about ego and pride in terms of the apparent success or failure of ministry based on worship attendance, longevity, and salary. Those of us who had been pastors in multiple parishes reflected on how often our most satisfying ministry seasons were in smaller, less prestigious settings.

In January and February, the group was asked to read a small book about missional leadership.⁹ This assignment led to one cohort member to muse about the *sea squirt*, an ocean creature which finds a home on a piece of coral, attaches itself, then eats its own brain. He

⁸ Daniel Erlander, *Tales of the Pointless People* (Daniel W. Erlander, 2010), www.danielerlander.com.

⁹ Keifert and Rooms, *Forming the Missional Church*.

wondered if it is the case in some of our churches that congregation members get so attached to their church building or routine that they shut down or descend into a persistent vegetative state! At the very least, we got a good chuckle together.

These monthly phone calls combined reflection on the reading material with collegial support and logistical planning for the upcoming WDNLH Conference. One of the participants affirmed the cohort by remarking that she had not felt so connected to a group of people since seminary. For her, the monthly check-ins were extremely valuable.

Intervening Variables

There were several intervening variables that affected the group. One intervening variable was that, during this time, I was interviewing for a call to serve a congregation out of state. The group was supportive and encouraging to me during this process. The holidays also affected our ability to schedule conference calls and submit written reflections. A third factor was an unusually cold winter and heavy snow accumulations, especially in the central part of the state, that hindered travel and disrupted worship schedules. The intervening variable with the largest impact, however, was my accepting the call to serve a congregation in Washington state that had me start two weeks ahead of the WDNLH Conference.

WDNLH 1.0 Quantitative Findings

I administered the end line questionnaire to my original cohort in early June 2018. I compared the means of the baseline and end line responses to two questions: “Overall, how confident do you feel in your ministry?” (see table 3) and “Overall how supported do you feel in your ministry?” (see table 4). In comparing the means of their responses using a paired t-test, there was an increase in mean responses, though the increase was not statistically significant. One factor in this is the small sample size. It is also noteworthy that the mean responses were

high to begin with (8.40 out of 10; 7.40 out of 10), and both saw an increase from the baseline to the end line (8.60 out of 10; 8.00 out of 10).

Table 3. Paired t-Test Results: Confidence in Ministry (WDNLH 1.0)

Rate your feeling of confidence in your ministry from No Confidence (1) to Extremely Confident (10)	x_b (N_b)	x_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Overall, how confident do you feel in your ministry?	8.40 (5)	8.60 (5)	4	-1.000	0.374

Table 4. Paired t-Test Results: Support in Ministry (WDNLH 1.0)

Rate your feeling of support you receive in your ministry from No Support (1) to Fully Supported (10)	x_b (N_b)	x_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Overall, how supported do you feel in your ministry?	7.40 (5)	8.00 (5)	4	-0.688	0.529

Regarding the cohort's feeling of encouragement in ministry, I wish I had asked the question differently. I asked the original cohort: "How often have you 'lost heart' in your ministry in the past twelve months?" I then gave them a Likert scale, from "Frequently" to "Never," with the opportunity to respond: "Don't Know." On the baseline questionnaire, four responded "Sometimes," while one person indicated "Rarely." On the end line questionnaire, three responded with "Sometimes," while two said "Rarely" (see table 5).

Table 5. Likert Scale: Lost Heart (WDNLH 1.0)

“How often have you ‘lost heart’ in your ministry in the past twelve months?”	Baseline	End line
Paula	Sometimes	Sometimes
Beverly	Sometimes	Sometimes
Emily	Sometimes	Sometimes
Joseph	Sometimes	Rarely
John	Rarely	Rarely

I realized midway through the research that I was trying to measure the feeling of *encouragement* in ministry. This realization led me to make sure that the baseline and end line questionnaires used for the WDNLH 2.0 conference asked the question: “Overall, how encouraged do you feel in your ministry?” Respondents were given a ten-point scale, from “Very Discouraged” (1) to “Very Encouraged” (10).

WDNLH 1.0 Qualitative Data

The qualitative data collected include the notes, transcripts, and conversations from the WDNLH 1.0 gathering and subsequent conference calls. The data also include the researcher’s experience of the energy, community, support, and knowledge generated by the group.

Support and Encouragement

The original cohort quickly embraced the concept of the conference. They resonated with the need for support, confidence, and encouragement in pastoral ministry. The group quickly became a very safe and supportive environment for us to share ideas, frustrations, prayer requests, and reflections. I further noticed that members of the group were quick to encourage

one another in their ministry struggles. I experienced the support of this group during my interview and call process.

Energy and Confidence

I am still struck by how energetic this cohort was both during and after WDNLH 1.0. The opportunity to work toward a positive change among pastors in the Montana Synod seemed to create energy and motivation. It was a confident group, too. I was the researcher and convener, but all five readily took initiative and exercised appropriate leadership. Each person in the group saw themselves as competent, having information, gifts, and abilities to share with others in the synod. Each person voluntarily took on assignments for the WDNLH 2.0 Conference planning and leadership. Each person followed through and contributed to the generation of knowledge and energy in the group.

WDNLH 2.0 March 1-2, 2018, Lewistown, Montana

The synodical learning event planned by the original cohort invited pastors and Lay Pastoral Associates (LPAs) to a conference around themes related to leading congregations in transition. The event was named: *We Do Not Lose Heart: Leading Congregations in Transition*. The schedule was patterned after the original gathering, except that we included more worship components and allowed for two sessions of workshops. In addition to our original workshop ideas, synod staff facilitated two more classes: one that explored family systems in congregations, and one that introduced a tool to assess a congregation's vitality.¹⁰

¹⁰ Linda Bobbitt, "Congregational Vitality Project," Congregational Vitality Project, accessed December 11, 2017, <http://www.congregationalvitalitysurvey.com/>.

Thirty-six pastors and church leaders from across the synod attended. Workshops and worship themes were devised and led by my colleagues. I facilitated the search conference conversation at this gathering, which led to a new group of leaders who extended the We Do Not Lose Heart movement further. Baseline and end line questionnaires, abbreviated versions of the original questionnaires, were administered on site to participants of the second conference. These data were also analyzed by comparing the mean scores in a paired t-test using SPSS software.

WDNLH 2.0 Conference

This group was large enough to resemble a more typical search conference. Participants sat around tables with five or six others. This conference included a strong worship component at the beginning and end of each day. Emily planned and led each of these worship times. She also had designed our outreach materials. She made it a point to tell me how much these activities energized her. Following worship, participants were oriented to the schedule and given consent forms and baseline questionnaires. Everyone filled out the questionnaire and turned them in prior to the next part of the gathering.

At each table people introduced themselves to the others and described their ministry settings. We then practiced Dwelling in the Word with 2 Corinthians 4:1-18 as our text. People paired off, reflected with their table mates, and then shared insights and ideas with the whole group. All of the note taking was public and presented on easel pads around the room.

Table 6. Participants' Dates of Birth, Ordination/Installation (WDNLH 2.0)

	Year of Birth N=28	Year of Ordination/ Installation N=28
1940-1949	6	0
1950-1959	13	0
1960-1969	5	1
1970-1979	1	0
1980-1989	4	1
1990-1999	0	3
2000-2009	0	4
2010-2019	0	19

We held large group discussions about what we see going on in the world, and what we see God doing, particularly in our ministry contexts. The group pointed to discord in our nation; decline in mutual respect; breakdown of traditional social systems; global warming; and aging, shrinking churches and communities. At the same time, participants said that they were seeing God bring people together to care for each other, organize food banks, and bury their dead. Technology felt like it was contributing to a hateful culture, but also helped people connect, learn, and gain awareness of a larger world.

The next discussion question had to do with our shared vision, callings, and hopes. Why had God's Spirit brought this group of leaders together? What did we have in common? Each table was given a large sheet of paper and ten minutes to consider these questions. Each table then shared their lists with the room. A group at one table wrote down the first thing that came up in their conversation: "We are all white women over fifty years old." Several tables included

language about passion for ministry and a deep desire to further God’s mission. Another table wrote that they “want to feed people physically and spiritually.”

My favorite line was from the table that wrote: “seeing the new calves in spring.” There was a foot of snow on the ground outside, but calving season was already underway—a sure sign of spring in Montana! The whole room seemed to resonate with that phrase, as it captured the sense of what it means to love this area, to live in this setting, and to do ministry in the last best place. The first day ended with dinner, the first offering of locally led workshops, and evening prayer.

Action Plan

The next morning, after morning prayer, I felt like we had enough information and energy already generated by the group. We reflected together on the biblical image of the jars of clay (2 Corinthians 4:7) and the impact of being a vulnerable witness to our vulnerable communities. The groups again broke off into workshops, then came back together to imagine what actions the group could take in step with God’s missional activity. By the end of our time together, six new leaders had volunteered to carry the torch of the We Do Not Lose Heart message in the Montana Synod. This leadership group playfully referred to themselves as *We Do Not Lose Heart: The Next Generation*. While I provided this new group with some support and encouragement,¹¹ they took the idea in a totally new direction. They created “We Do Not Lose Heart” devotional materials and an outline for six worship services that a congregation could use

¹¹ I met with one of these leaders at another Montana Synod event, the annual Pastor’s Conference at Chico Hot Springs April 3-5, 2018. I had flown back to Montana for this event as well. What I noticed was that my role, and the role of the entire original cohort, was diminishing. And that was okay.

for a summer preaching series, or for personal study.¹² These materials were posted on the Montana Synod website in time to be introduced at the annual assembly in June 2018. This coincided with the end of my research window.

WDNLH 2.0 Quantitative Findings

Participants filled out baseline and end line questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of the event. One demographic factor I found interesting was the age of the participants relative to the year of ordination (pastors) or installation (LPAs). Two-thirds of those attending the conference were born before 1960. At the same time, two-thirds of the participants became rostered leaders in the ELCA in the last ten years. Congregations in Montana are being led by older pastors and LPAs with limited experience in church leadership (see table 6).

Table 7. Paired t-Test Results: Confidence in Ministry (WDNLH 2.0)

Rate your feeling of confidence in your ministry from No Confidence (1) to Extremely Confident (10)	x_b (N_b)	x_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Overall, how confident do you feel in your ministry?	6.79 (28)	7.39 (28)	27	-2.756	0.010

Table 8. Paired t-Test Results: Support in Ministry (WDNLH 2.0)

Rate your feeling of support you receive in your ministry from No Support (1) to Fully Supported (10)	x_b (N_b)	x_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Overall, how supported do you feel in your ministry?	6.78 (27)	7.26 (27)	26	-1.791	0.085

¹² Peggy Pau Leuzinger, "We Do Not Lose Heart," Montana Synod ELCA, accessed January 10, 2019, <http://www.montanasynd.org/4/post/2018/07/we-do-not-lose-heart.html>.

Table 9. Paired t-Test Results: Encouragement in Ministry (WDNLH 2.0)

Rate your feeling of encouragement in your ministry from Very Discouraged (1) to Very Encouraged (10)	x_b (N_b)	x_e (N_e)	df	t-value	p
Overall, how encouraged do you feel in your ministry?	6.67 (27)	7.67 (27)	26	-2.926	0.007

Those attending the conference reported significantly higher feelings of confidence in ministry (mean = 7.39) after the conference than what they had reported prior to the conference (mean = 6.79); $t_{(27)} = -2.756$, $p = 0.010$ (see table 7). Participants reported significantly higher feelings of encouragement in their ministry contexts (mean = 7.67) after the conference than before it (mean = 6.67); $t_{(26)} = -2.926$, $p = 0.007$, (see table 9). They also revealed higher feelings of support after the conference (mean= 7.26) than before it (mean = 6.78); $t_{(26)} = -1.791$, $p = 0.085$. This increase, however, is not statistically significant (see table 8).

WDNLH 2.0 Qualitative Data

Just as the quantitative data gathered were focused on feelings of support, confidence, and encouragement for ministry, so also one way to organize the qualitative data is to consider the same three categories: support, confidence, and encouragement. As noted before, the qualitative data include the notes taken on easel pads. They also include conversations that took place in pairs, at tables, and in the large group. The workshops and the conversations they generated were also qualitative in nature. The baseline and end line questionnaires gave participants the opportunity to make open comments, and I have included these written submissions as well.

Support

This category has to do with how well the leader feels connected with and has access to resources and relationships. Worship was a time when those gathered were able to connect with God and each other through prayer, movement, shared song, and Holy Communion. Several of the participants told me that they were from the same cluster, and that they had all come to be able to spend more time with each other. “I am not alone!” wrote one participant on the end line questionnaire. “Great to meet people involved in rural ministry” was another comment. Representatives from the synod office were present, and it was hoped that their being there would convey a sense of partnership with the larger church. Ironically, when one synod staffer gave a fifteen-minute announcement about an upcoming synod function, the energy in the room became much more subdued. People attending came for mutual support through listening, sharing, scripture, worship, and wonder.

Confidence

Several comments written on the end line questionnaire point to the language of confidence in ministry. It is related to support, in that support tends to promote faith and certainty that the task at hand is manageable. Some of this confidence related to the language of the missional church and the ongoing activity of the Spirit. “God is steadfast” wrote one person. “God is still working!” wrote another. “God is present doing a new thing” wrote a third. Confidence amid difficulty was another theme. One participant wrote: “Yes, my two congregations are dying, but we are still vibrant, strong, and able to live out God’s promises to his glory in our communities.”

Encouragement

A third category for organizing the qualitative data is encouragement. “We do not lose heart!” The phrase itself seemed to have the ability to promote courage and hope for the future for these leaders. As confidence builds on support, so also encouragement is an expression of confidence pointed toward the future. “Embrace the suck!” was the joyful resolve of one member of the Next Generation leadership group. “In the face of adversity all things are possible” said another.

Some of the comments were directed to encourage me and my research. “Your work is extremely valuable,” said one respondent. Another person asked me to start a Facebook page through which those in the group could encourage one another. The nature of encouragement, it seems, is that losing heart is an ongoing threat, and one powerful form of support is mutual, ongoing encouragement.

Interpreting the Data

The intent of this action research project was to determine what impact a search conference would have on a small group of leaders of dying congregations. The quantitative data from the original cohort were inconclusive but suggested that the participants experienced increased feelings of support, encouragement, and confidence for ministry as a result of the intervention. The qualitative data gave further evidence that this was the case. The intervention provided an environment and occasion for increased collegiality and mutual support. The group experienced encouragement from one another and from the readings. They were motivated to extend that encouragement toward colleagues in the synod. They were affirmed as leaders and displayed confidence and competency in conducting their own synodical learning event.

Data collected from WDNLH 2.0 gave more evidence of a positive impact. The participants reported feeling higher levels of support, encouragement, and confidence in ministry following the conference than they reported prior to the event. The increases were statistically significant in the categories of confidence and encouragement. At this conference, several new leaders emerged and were given support for additional efforts to increase knowledge and collegiality across the synod.

Comments by participants on the end line questionnaire include statements like “changed my whole thinking,” “thank you, thank you, thank you,” and “nice to connect and see colleagues.” Participants reflected on 2 Corinthians 4 as well, saying things like “Yes, my two congregations are dying, but we are still vibrant, strong, and able to live out God’s promises to his glory in our communities;” “we are earthen vessels participating in God’s mission where we are located;” and (my favorite): “Embrace the suck! Things change. We change with them. That is growth.”

This chapter has presented the quantitative and qualitative findings of this AR intervention. The final chapter explores the meaning and significance of the findings, and offers reflections on the findings in light of the contextual, theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

The process of learning I have undertaken over the last four years has been enlightening and energizing for me, both personally and professionally. This final chapter describes the impact and significance that my research might have for pastors, LPAs, and synodical leaders engaged in God's mission across the Montana Synod and beyond. After a brief summary of my research and findings, I show how hospice and missional leadership both intervene with a living system at a time of crisis. The intervention focuses energy on the mercy of God and the health and dignity of the living system, to equip, encourage, and support the members of the system to be able to address the future with confidence.

I identify some key takeaways and applications of this research, then reflect on the data through my contextual, theoretical, biblical, and theological lenses. I include some thoughts about the limits of generalization of the research findings. Finally, I wonder about possible applications and topics for further research.

Summary of Research Findings

The idea for this project began years ago as I observed the similarities between my work as a hospice chaplain and my work serving in two very small, struggling ELCA congregations. I was energized by the synergy of the two disciplines, and I wondered if other church leaders might benefit from the crossover as well. I began with the idea of simply applying hospice principles to leadership in dying congregations. This doctoral program introduced me to

missional theology and adaptive leadership. Biblical themes of vulnerability and resiliency rounded out my research lenses.

I wondered how an action research (AR) intervention might impact leaders of dying congregations in the Mountain West and was particularly interested in investigating levels of confidence, resiliency, support, and encouragement in their ministry settings. I came to embrace a pragmatic worldview and learned about a method of pragmatic AR known as search conferencing. I adapted this tool for my research and conducted a *missional search conference* with a small group of pastors of dying congregations (WDNLH 1.0). We listened to and learned from the Holy Spirit and each other. We imagined, planned, and conducted a second missional search conference (WDNLH 2.0) attended by over thirty colleagues from across the synod.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected from this research project revealed positive impact. The original cohort generated knowledge together, collaborated to conduct the synodical event (WDNLH 2.0), and experienced a mutually affirming sense of community during the process. Data gathered from participants revealed statistically significant improvements in feelings of confidence and encouragement for ministry following the conference.

Hospice and Missional Interventions

I started this doctoral program with the idea of applying hospice principles to leadership in dying congregations. I designed and conducted an AR intervention, a missional search conference, and measured levels of support, confidence, and encouragement for ministry before and after. Throughout my research, participants indicated that these interventions left them feeling more supported, more confident, and more encouraged for their ministry. The last piece of the puzzle fit into place when I realized that the AR intervention used for this research not

only mirrored the approach and goals of a hospice intervention, it also followed the same pattern that a pastor might use for a missional intervention in a congregation finding itself at a thin place, facing an adaptive challenge.

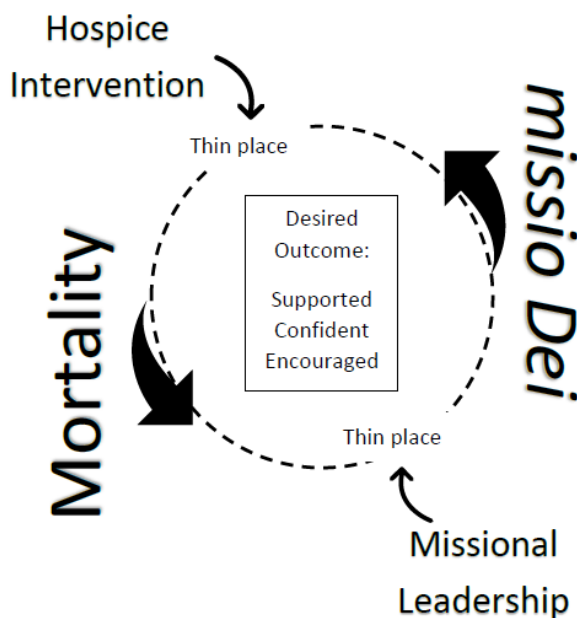


Figure 6. Hospice Interventions and Missional Leadership

The goal of a hospice intervention is to care for the patient, not to cure the disease. Hospice comes alongside the patient and their family to help them come to terms with their mortality and to adapt to the challenge of transitioning from life to death. Hospice providers offer clinical tools like medications and therapies to address pain and suffering. The intervention includes non-clinical components as well, such as help with insurance forms, spiritual support, and grief counseling for the family. The desired outcome of a hospice intervention is that the patient and family feel like they have the support they need; that they feel confident that they can accomplish tasks and administer medications; and that they find the courage they need to move forward through this process, no matter how difficult the journey.

My research intervention followed a similar pattern. My focus was caring for the pastors, not fixing their congregations. I came alongside my colleagues and invited them to come to terms with the mortality of our congregations and the mercy of God. We recognized the thin places and vulnerability of our contexts. We did not lose heart. We identified the gifts and opportunities God had provided in our group and settings. We realized that we had everything we needed to encourage other colleagues for their ministries. WDNLH 2.0 provided some tools to manage symptomatic pain and anxiety in our churches, but the conference was mainly a non-clinical intervention designed to help these pastors and LPAs feel supported, feel confident, and feel encouraged for the journeys they were taking with their congregations.

This is the impact of a missional intervention in a congregation. The pastor focuses on the health of the congregation, not the disease. The congregation sees what God is doing rather than dwelling on what it can no longer do. Sermons point to the mercy and mission of God. Mortality and other thin places—empty Sunday School rooms, broken windows, dwindling finances—are acknowledged, grieved, and placed in the mercy of God. The congregation is dying, but it is not dead yet. Under such missional leadership, neither the pastor nor congregation lose heart for ministry. They feel a sense of support from each other, from God, and from the community. They grow in confidence in the leadership of the Holy Spirit and in their own capacity to accomplish the work of the church.

Research Findings and Methodology

Four key themes emerged from the data that had to do with the design of the methodology and design of the intervention itself. These are summarized in four statements I heard repeatedly during the conferences.

I Am Not Alone

This project reaffirmed the value of mutual conversation and consolation among ministry peers. The *missional search conference* was an effective intervention tool for promoting collaboration and mutual support. They worshiped and prayed together. They drank beer in the motel lounge together after hours. They listened to God and to each other. The tablemates at WDNLH 2.0 who identified themselves as “white women over fifty” found common ground in their love for new calves in the spring and of a preferred future for their faith communities. They returned to their homes knowing that they were not alone. The demands of pastoral ministry and the sheer geography and climate of Montana promote isolation. It is always a good idea to bring leaders together to talk, pray, and work together toward a preferred future.

“God’s Got This!”

Something “clicked” for participants as the focus of ministry in dying congregations shifted to God’s mercy and mission. Dwelling in the Word was an essential component of both gatherings. Second Corinthians 4 was a rich text for reflection and conversation. Worship time revolved around this same text. A woman came up to me during a break at WDNLH 2.0. The remote, rural congregation in her care was not thriving. She was a retired school teacher and had attended training to be a Lay Pastoral Associate (LPA). Every week she preached, led worship, and cared for her home town congregation as best she could. The church had ceased to have the means to support an ordained pastor years ago. As the congregation aged and shrank, she blamed herself.

She left the WDNLH 2.0 conference with a different narrative running through her head. “I am not a failure!” she told me with a look of relief and hope. The conference reminded her that the congregation was held in the power and mercy of God. The little congregation might not

keep its doors open for much longer. She, however, was not the problem. God had sent her to this congregation to help them be faithful to God and to each other to the very end, for as long as it takes. God has got this. She went home telling herself a new story of encouragement and hope in the mercy and mission of God.

Trust Me

The third takeaway for me in this research was the need to let local leaders lead. I met extraordinary pastors and lay leaders who exhibited remarkable faith, resiliency, and innovation when it comes to leading congregations in the Montana Synod. They are called, gifted, and Spirit-led. They love God's people. They love Montana. One young pastor told me that his chief barriers were not geography or dwindling numbers, but rather limits imposed on him by the synod and denomination—regulations and bylaws about what he could and could not do, limits on those with whom they could form ministry partnerships, and limits on how congregations could provide him fair compensation. "I know what needs to get done and how to make a living doing it," he told me, "I just need the synod to trust me."

Embrace the Suck

This last quote always brings a smile to my face: "*Embrace the suck.*" It is not unique to Montana, but it does capture an element of life in the Mountain West that is understood by those who live there. The research interventions helped people feel more supported, confident, and encouraged for their leadership and ministry. The journey is still long and hard, though.

Missional leadership involves hunkering down and seeing the thing through to the other side.

Embrace the suck. Or, as Paul wrote:

Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on

what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Research Findings and Context

The wildfires in western Montana in the early 2000s markedly affected the local landscape. From a distance the hills looked burned and barren. Up close they were overgrowing with new greenery. The forest was alive and well. It just looked different now, and we could not see the new thing from a distance.

The congregations of the Montana Synod were formed during a different era. The spiritual, economic, and demographic landscape of Montana is changing, and the church is changing, too. Montanans are used to boom and bust, adaptation, new beginnings. The search conference was the equivalent of a barn raising. It brought people together from great distances for a shared, greater good. Everyone pitched in. From a distance, the congregations of the Montana Synod look barren and brown, littered with charred and abandoned buildings on the landscape. Up close, sitting around a table *Dwelling in the Word*, leaders witnessed the Spirit's power and leadership giving birth to new things even as old things die away.

Meeting the Future Boldly

The participation, energy, and discussion generated at WDNLH 2.0 suggests that leaders in the synod crave more mutual conversation saturated in God's word. Several participants told me that they hoped events like this would be available in the future. These pastors and LPAs want and need forums in which they can discern the leading of the Holy Spirit and devise plans to work to further God's mission. Time, distance, day jobs, and travel expenses are significant obstacles to overcome, but my research findings show that church leaders will take the time and drive the miles if they know their voices will be heard.

I wonder if the Montana Synod would benefit from missionally reinventing its annual assembly. The current assembly format is from a bygone era. It is hierarchical and formal. Denominational representatives and ministry talking heads take turns going to the microphone to report to a passive audience what is being done in other places and what the audience should do to support these efforts. Motions are submitted, vetted, presented, debated, voted on, and recorded for the minutes for next year's meeting. Keynote speakers and workshop leaders present their recently completed Doctor of Ministry theses to audiences who neither understand nor care about the subject matter.

It is expensive and time consuming. Attending the assembly for me meant taking a day off work at the hospital; driving six hours to the event; listening to presentations Friday night and Saturday morning; then driving six hours home on Saturday afternoon in order to be ready for my one-hundred-and-fifty-mile round trip preaching circuit on Sunday. I was back at my hospice day job Monday morning. Lost income, long days of driving, and little to show for it.

Synod staff have noticed the ineffectiveness of the annual assembly. Attempts are made to gather pastors in cluster meetings and bishop's convocations. These events are still driven by synod staff and outside experts, however. Cluster events lack the critical mass and time needed to truly empower local leaders to action.

The WDNLH 2.0 conference offers a possible format for a reinvented synod assembly. The synod could stage a number of regional conferences instead of (or in addition to) the current gathering in Great Falls. These regional assemblies would involve up to forty local pastors and church leaders who can make the trip in a couple of hours, not an entire afternoon. These gatherings would give the participants a voice at the table. Formal, top-down greetings and mandates could be replaced with time *Dwelling in the Word*, asking attendees how God might be

inviting the group to be in partnership with God's mission. The conversation would shift to a focus on local solutions to local issues led by local leaders. The synod staff would act as a facilitator for empowering and resourcing local leaders for participation in God's mission. Action plans and ministry initiatives could then be communicated to the rest of the synod and ELCA for mutual learning and encouragement. Denominational and ministry representatives could then share updates with each of these smaller groups in person, or through alternative, electronic media.

Research Findings and Theoretical Lenses

The WDNLH conferences incorporated many elements of adaptive leadership. The conference theme identified the challenge of leadership in dying congregations. As the facilitator I managed the temperature of the room in order to create a holding environment in which participants sensed both the urgency of the challenge and a safe space in which they could plan. Food, humor, and hospitality set participants at ease in order to build trust. Worship, prayer, and *Dwelling in the Word* ensured attention to the Holy Spirit. Conversations about the real struggles of ministry and the future of the church in Montana heightened the urgency to act. Each person was given a voice. The work of the organization was given to the people who make up the organization. My role as facilitator was to take the balcony view in mind as the Spirit led the conversations. These are all behaviors of adaptive leadership that are built into the design of a missional search conference.

Research and Hospice

I have already noted the similarities between a missional leadership intervention and a hospice intervention. The research intervention confirmed the benefit of hospice principles for equipping leaders of dying congregations. LPAs and newer pastors attending the event expressed

appreciation for the insights, perspectives, and the *non-anxious presence* of the more experienced pastors attending and leading WDNLH 2.0. By talking about our shared environment and context, and by introducing language of congregational mortality, the conference *normalized* the struggles being experienced by the pastors and LPAs. Attendees of the conferences were themselves treated with *dignity and respect*. They were thanked and appreciated for their work. They were encouraged to see the people in their congregations in the same light. The search conference utilized a *team approach* to problem solving. Every voice was heard. Every experience was honored by the rest of the group. By placing responsibility for the future of the church in God's hands (where it belongs), the conferences promoted *self-care and healthy boundaries*.

I would have liked to spend more time around *grief and loss* and how it relates to a missional leadership intervention. If I had time for another session on Saturday afternoon, I would introduce language of grief and bereavement, then invite a conversation around each table around the question: *What is hardest for you right now?* Those responses could then be shared in the large group listed on the easel pads. Some would be grieving a loss of a way of life. A person might share that the only gas station in town closed last year. Someone else would talk about the lack of children in Sunday School, or the sheer number of funerals performed every year. Another person might bring up the uncertainty of being able to afford health insurance or finding work as a pastor. Those fears and losses could then be acknowledged and honored. These conversations could inform the choices made by the group about what projects to undertake to improve the ministries of the church.

Research Findings and Biblical Lenses

The biblical text of 2 Corinthians 4:1-18 was central to this research and the interventions. The phrase itself—*we do not lose heart*—had an appeal to many of the participants. Some said they signed up for the event as soon as they heard the title. Several repeated the phrase in the written comments on their end line questionnaires. The passage provided rich content for *Dwelling in the Word*. I heard reflections on the mercy of God; jars of clay; being hard pressed but not crushed; death at work in us but life at work in you; the god of this age; not preaching ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord; and fixing our eyes on what is unseen, not what is seen.

The strength and appeal of the text lies in the explicit acknowledgement of the challenges facing leaders in the church. Congregations in Montana live on the edge of survival. Pastors and LPAs feel frustrated, helpless, isolated, and discouraged. Second Corinthians 4 addresses the issue of morale and identifies God's mercy as the source and strength to persevere.

The parable of the Sheep and Goats was not an explicit element in the WDNLH conferences. The passage did inform and support conversations about caring for those in need in our communities. One pastor related to me that she had always read this passage as a mandate to care for others. This was the first time she heard it in terms of identifying herself and her congregation as the ones in need of care.

During one break an LPA asked me to say more about the vulnerability of the missionary. My response was to wonder if dying congregations exist precisely to bear witness to the gospel in the dying communities of eastern Montana. Who better to witness to a dying community than a dying congregation? She absorbed what I had told her, then excused herself: "I need to go and write that down," she said.

Research Findings and Theological Lenses

Missional ecclesiology presupposes that the church is created and called to be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's unfolding promise to mend the entire universe. The original cohort spent time wondering what this means for pastors in congregations. As pastors, are we benefactors who bring something to our people? Or are we called on to accompany our congregations and communities, learning and receiving as much from others as we offer them? Joseph offered this reflection: "We can't necessarily fix a congregation, but we can be *mess mates* with them. We can walk alongside them, cry with them, laugh with them, support them and they support us, and that feeling of being together, brothers and sisters together through this journey."

My research dealt with the leaders of dying congregations, so my findings can only address how this group of research participants lived into this calling. Pastors and LPAs who attended the conferences reported feeling more confident and encouraged for ministry. Their health would be seen in their congregations as a *sign* of God's mercy and mission. The conferences inspired members of the group to be *instruments* of the gospel, creating learning events, workshops, worship, preaching, and devotional materials that could be used in local congregations. Research findings showed that attendees left inspired and encouraged. WDNLH was for them a *foretaste* of what Christian community in Montana could be.

The findings also revealed the Holy Spirit's leadership at work. The Holy Spirit continues to raise up local leaders to address local concerns with local solutions. I met dozens of clergy and lay leaders through this research who are gifted and filled with Spirit power to lead congregations. The challenge for the Montana Synod is to keep them. There are only a few larger congregations in the state that can afford to pay synodical guidelines for a pastor with more than

ten years of experience. This leads to a bit of a brain drain, as mature pastors leave Montana in order to find full-time work in pastoral ministry.¹ I wonder if the synod or maybe the seminaries can find ways to contract (read: pay) these pastors to stay in their remote settings in order to serve as mentors and teachers for local lay leaders, or oversee administration of a cluster or county. Faith-based grants might be available for such a program. The synod could divide the associate to the Bishop position among four to six regional “sub-bishops.” If a priority is given to supporting local leaders, other synodical projects may need to have to face cutbacks. There are no quick fixes or easy solutions.

The second insight of this research into the working of the Holy Spirit is seeing again how the Spirit uses wilderness times in the life of a pastor or congregation to teach and train this church to be the sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom of God. Collectively, congregational mortality is a kind of thin place, where the mercy of God is more clearly seen. Congregations and pastors in the Montana Synod and across the ELCA are being led through this wilderness, learning to rely on and more fully reflect the mercy of God. These local leaders and congregations are tomorrow’s teachers. When the rest of the ELCA begins to come to grips with its mortality, they will be the ones who can guide the conversation about what God is doing next.

Limits of Generalizability of Findings

The scope of my research was limited to the context of leadership in dying congregations in the Montana Synod. I studied an intervention with pastors and LPAs, not congregations. Furthermore, I narrowed my focus on congregations that were dying or at risk. Larger, healthier congregations and their leaders were not included. My research took place in the Montana Synod

¹ I am Exhibit A.

of the ELCA. One cannot be sure of the impact on the findings if I worked with a group from a different synod or region, or if I dealt with non-Lutheran leaders or congregations. I believe that a missional search conference intervention would work in a larger, more stable ministry setting. Adaptive leadership and the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable are certainly applicable in most every shape, size, and flavor of congregation. Congregations that are not facing death might identify and address other *thin places* and sources of grief and loss. The thin place might not be death and dying, but rather transitions, changing culture, political divisiveness, or uncertainty about the future.

Questions for Further Research

I would like to use the missional search conference model in a congregation. Would this process and conversation be an effective way to support, encourage, and build confidence among the membership of a local congregation? Would it resonate with the last thirty members of a small congregation? Is the process and concept universal enough that a local pastor or LPA could lead this kind of a conversation? Could a synod have a staff member or team of missional search conference facilitators?

My research does not address churches that are facing traumatic, sudden closures. Likewise, it does not address the death itself. I do not address when or how a congregation should decide to close its doors or merge with the congregation in the next town. I do not have a criteria or instrument to accurately measure the congregation's vitality, or to diagnose the terminal condition of the congregation. I wondered about developing a list of congregational ADLs (activities of daily living) to assess quality of life and likelihood of requiring synodical intervention. I have not explored what a synodical intervention in a dying congregation would

look like. There are resources out there for rituals and occasions for church closure.² It might be interesting to have congregations make bucket lists and other legacy declarations.

I suspect that just about ANY gathering of these pastors that focused on worship and Bible study would have brought about increased morale. The language of hospice is not integral in that regard, though I do think that the *missio Dei* focus (as opposed to self-improvement or church growth) did play a central part. I wonder how a different scripture focus, i.e. Luke 10, would shape the conversation.

Summary

I am thankful for the many chaplains and health care professionals who know more about hospice care and grief support than I do. I thank God for their incredible work, day in and day out, providing dignity, comfort, and care to end-of-life patients and their families. I am in awe of the innumerable pastors, LPAs, lay leaders, and synod staff out there giving their hearts and lives in service to small, remote, aging, *dying* congregations in Montana and across the globe. I thank God for them and echo the words of Christ: *well done, good and faithful servant*. My hope in this thesis was to bring some of the things I learned as a hospice chaplain to bear in my ministry with very small congregations, and to see if maybe what I have gleaned might help other pastors and church leaders. Those who have come alongside me on this journey have experienced renewal and hope for ministry. That is enough. To God be the glory. Amen.

² Beth Ann. Gaede, *Ending with Hope: A Resource for Closing Congregations* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002).

EPILOGUE

I have never been more hopeful, enthusiastic, and optimistic about the future of the church. This degree program and process has renewed and refreshed my theology, especially my perception of the Triune God and the Spirit's power and activity in the world. My studies and research have helped me discover and name my own leadership tendencies, strengths, and growth areas. The missional search conference is a knowledge-generating, energy-creating, and community-building tool that is becoming integral to my ministry and leadership. I have been blessed by new friendships, new ideas, and new expressions of the Holy Spirit.

It is a time of great transition in the life of the church of Christ, I think. I used to lament not being a pastor in “the good old days,” but I suspect that I might have gotten bored. No, through the mercy of God I have *this* ministry: coming alongside a dying church, offering dignity, comfort, and care to the bride of Christ. I am the one who is blessed by these amazing people of faith, their stories, their courage, and their love.

One of my favorite hospice memories is of a patient and her husband. They had been married over sixty-eight years. They were a tiny couple—neither one much more than five feet tall. She was confined to her hospital bed, and he stayed all day at her side. At night the man would climb into the hospital bed to snuggle and hold his bride through the night. One morning the floor nurse entered the room to discover that the woman had died during the night—in her husband's arms. This, I have come to see, is the love of Christ for his church. *Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants* (Psalm 116:15). Amen.

APPENDIX A

Letter of Consent

Dear Colleague in Ministry,

I would like to invite you to be part of my research project entitled “We Do Not Lose Heart: Missional Leadership in Dying Congregations,” exploring how the application of hospice principles and missional theology can equip and encourage leaders of dying congregations. You were selected because I believe you are someone with a passion for ministry and that you are currently serving a congregation that exhibits signs of being at or near the end of its life. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

I am conducting this study as part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore ways that the Montana Synod can support pastors and other leaders in congregations that are facing decline and possible closure in the not so distant future. I believe that treating these congregations like hospice patients will promote a higher quality of life for these congregations for as long as they remain open. I further believe that leaders who can recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in the midst of these congregations will experience more hope, encouragement, and resiliency in their ministry.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to be a part of a *search conference*. This entails the following commitments from you:

1. A six hour retreat in Lewistown, Montana, October 27-28, 2017. The Friday session will be held from 6:00-9:00pm. Saturday morning we will meet from 8:30-11:30am. Participants will identify small experiments to be conducted in local ministry settings over the course of six months.
2. Participants will agree to at least monthly communication with the researcher and other participants.
3. Participants will be given monthly reading assignments (not to exceed 20 pages), including articles about hospice philosophy, missional theology, adaptive challenges, and other relevant topics. You will be asked to comment on these readings.
4. A follow-up, two-hour meeting will be scheduled during the 2018 Pastors’ Conference at Chico Hot Springs.
5. A final 2 hour meeting will be held in Great Falls at the 2018 Synod Assembly.
6. Participants will fill out a brief survey at the beginning and again at the end of this process.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

There are no risks involved in this study. Any inconvenience only comes from the time taken to participate. There are no benefits to you for participating other than the benefits you experience being part of a small group cohort.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. All data will be kept in a locked file in my home, and on password protected computers. Only my advisors and I will have access to the data and any audio recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. All raw data including audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be destroyed by May 19, 2022. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number of participants in this group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with me, the Montana Synod, or Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Douglas M Peterson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at xxxxx@gmail.com or 406-XXX-XXXX. You may also contact Professor Daniel Anderson at xxxxx@luthersem.edu, or Professor Alvin Luedke, at xxxxx@luthersem.edu.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

I consent to be audio recorded:

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

We Do Not Lose Heart Baseline/ End line Questionnaire

PART I. Demographics

- Q1. Participant Identification Number (1-9): _____
- Q2. Denomination
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 - Other: _____
- Q3. Ministry Context
- Single point congregation
 - Multi-point parish
 - Other: _____
- Q4. Year of ordination: _____
- Q5. Year of birth: _____

PART II. Ministry Confidence
--

- Q6. Overall, how confident do you feel in your ministry role (on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most confident)
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------------------|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| <i>No confidence</i> | | | | | | | | <i>Extremely Confident</i> | |
- Q7. Rate your level of **confidence** in the following:
(using a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most confident. Write “N/A” if not applicable)
- a. Your theological and biblical knowledge _____
 - b. Your leadership skills _____
 - c. Your leadership resources _____
 - d. Your congregation’s ability to address challenges _____
 - e. Your ability to maintain appropriate boundaries _____
 - f. Your relationship with God _____

- g. Your relationship with your congregation _____
- h. Your relationship with the synod office _____

PART III. Ministry Support

Q8. Overall, how supported do you feel in your ministry role (on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being fully supported)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>No support</i>					<i>Fully Supported</i>				

Q9. Rate the level of **support** you receive from the following:
(using a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest level of support.
Write "N/A" if not applicable)

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|-------|
| a. | The Holy Spirit | _____ |
| b. | You congregation | _____ |
| c. | Your family | _____ |
| d. | Friends | _____ |
| e. | Colleagues in Ministry | _____ |
| f. | The synod office | _____ |

PART IV. Resiliency

Q10. In 2 Corinthians 4:1, the Apostle Paul urges his readers not to "lose heart." What do you think he means by that?

Q11. How often have you "lost heart" in your ministry in the past twelve months? (select one)

- 1 Frequently
- 2 Sometimes
- 3 Occasionally
- 4 Never
- Don't know

Q12. Rate how likely you are to turn to help from the following sources "the next time you lose heart" in ministry: (using a scale of 1-10, with 10 being "definitely will." Write "N/A" if not applicable)

- a. The Holy Spirit _____
- b. You congregation _____
- c. Your family _____
- d. Friends _____
- e. Colleagues in Ministry _____
- f. The synod office _____

Thank you for your participation!

APPENDIX C

We Do Not Lose Heart: Leadership in Dying Congregations Leadership Conference

October 27-28, 2017, Yogo Inn, Lewistown, Montana

Friday, October 27, 6:00pm-9:00pm

Session One: 6:00-7:30pm

Describe your current ministry context.

What is hardest for you right now in your ministry setting?

What do you think is hardest for your people these days?

What is your own experience with hospice or end of life care?

In what ways does your congregation's current situation resemble the dying process of a loved one? How is it different?

Session Two: 7:45-9:00pm

Read and reflect on 2 Corinthians 4:1-18, then answer the following:

For what purpose do you think God has given you this ministry?

What does it look like to "lose heart"?

Tell about a time in your ministry when you "lost heart."

What helped you during that time?

Saturday, October 28, 8:30-11:00am

Session Three: 8:30-10am

What might this group work together to accomplish among our dying congregations:

To improve the congregation's quality of life?

To relieve suffering?

To promote the dignity of the congregation?

To facilitate the processing of the congregation's grief?

To equip the congregation for the challenges and choices they face?

Session Four: 10:15-11:30am

Which one or two experiments shall we choose?

Who agrees to do what?

APPENDIX D

TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

We Do Not Lose Heart Search Conference

I, _____, agree to transcribe data for this study. I agree that I will:

1. Keep all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than Douglas M Peterson, the researcher on this study, or his advisors: Alvin Luedke and Daniel Anderson;
2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession. This includes:
 - using closed headphones when transcribing audio-taped interviews;
 - keeping all transcript documents and digitized interviews in computer password-protected files;
 - closing any transcription programs and documents when temporarily away from the computer;
 - keeping any printed transcripts in a secure location such as a locked file cabinet; and
 - permanently deleting any e-mail communication containing the data;
3. Give all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the primary investigator when I have completed the research tasks;
4. Erase or destroy all research information in any form or format that is not returnable to the primary investigator (e.g., information stored on my computer hard drive) upon completion of the research tasks.

Signature of transcriber

Date

Signature of principal investigator

Date

APPENDIX E

Mission Venture Partnership Agreement

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” – John 20:21

We Do Not Lose Heart Conference, March 1-2, 2018, Lewistown, Montana

The Montana Synod and the _____ Cluster agree to partner together in a mission venture to stage an NRIT conference in Lewistown, MT, March 1-2, 2018. The “We Do Not Lose Heart” Conference aims to equip and encourage pastors and AIMs serving small or declining congregations facing change or transition. This conference is part of a project for a Doctor of Ministry degree being pursued by Rev. Doug Peterson, Hamilton, MT.

The Montana Synod agrees to:

- Provide \$2400 from the Mission Venture Capital Fund to the Five Valleys Cluster for this mission venture project (see attached budget estimates)
- Lift up this Mission Venture in prayer
- Regularly consult on the progress of the Mission Venture through the current

DEOM

- Publish ministries stories of this Mission Venture through its newsletter and various other means

The Cluster agrees to:

- Provide leadership and support for the We Do Not Lose Heart Conference.

▪ Encourage its member congregations to contribute to the Mission Venture Fund of the Montana Synod.

▪ Offer quarterly updates on how funds have been expended

▪ Regularly consult with synod coach on joys, struggles and progress on identified expected outcomes

▪ Identify ministry stories to be shared with others in the Montana Synod.

▪ Identify this Mission Venture as a partnership with the Montana Synod in all publicity or communication

▪ Advise the Synod and gain approval for any deviations from the approved project.

Montana Synod

Cluster

Date _____

Date _____

APPENDIX F

January 6, 2018

Dear Colleagues in the Montana Synod,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Leading small congregations is challenging work. Shrinking numbers, aging populations, dwindling resources, increasing needs, and fewer leaders. Currently, one of my jobs is as the pastor of a very small congregation seventy-five miles from my home. I have a one-eighth time call there. A good Sunday has eight worshipers AND a piano player. My day job is as a Hospice Chaplain. I work with nurses, caregivers, and family members to help people at end of life experience dignity, comfort, and compassion. What I've noticed over the last few years is that these jobs have a lot in common. Everybody dies. Every congregation has a life span as well. We don't blame or criticize people for getting older. We shouldn't blame or criticize congregations for getting older, either. Instead, as with hospice patients and their families, we ought to treat aging, shrinking, dying congregations with dignity and compassion. It seems to me that's what Jesus would do, don't you think?

If you are serving a congregation that is shrinking, aging, in decline, dying, or simply facing transition and change, I'd like to invite you to the Yogo Inn in Lewistown, MT on March 1st and 2nd, 2018 (Thursday-Friday) for a gathering of pastors and LPAs. The theme of the conference is based on 2 Corinthians 4:1— "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, ***we do not lose heart.***" The conference will feature uplifting worship, interactive Bible study, good food, and workshops intended to give you resources and encouragement for your ministry. The full schedule is included with this letter. Some of the workshops include:

- Strategic Planning in Times of Transition
- Addressing Congregational Grief
- Family Systems in Congregational Leadership
- Assessing Your Congregation's Vitality

This *We Do Not Lose Heart* Conference is a part of my research for a Doctor of Ministry degree I am pursuing at Luther Seminary. I have a heart for leaders in small congregations. I know how difficult it can be to "not lose heart." At this conference we will encourage each other as we explore what it means that we have this ministry ***by the mercy of God.***

I am grateful to the Montana Synod and Thrivent for grants that make my research and this conference affordable! The cost of the conference, including dinner on Thursday and breakfast on Friday, has been covered by a Mission Venture Fund grant. The only cost to you is travel and Thursday night lodging (approximately \$90/room).

To register for the *We Do Not Lose Heart* Conference, March 1-2, 2018, contact the Synod Office, 406-XXX-XXXX. You'll need to then book your own room at the Yogo Inn, 406-XXX-XXXX. The synod has reserved a block of rooms, first come, first served.

In Christ,

Rev. Doug Peterson

xxxxx@gmail.com

APPENDIX G

March 1, 2018

We Do Not Lose Heart Conference: Implied Consent Letter

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to this “We Do Not Lose Heart” Conference. I pray that it is a time of renewal and encouragement for you in your current ministry setting. This event is connected to research that I am doing as part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke. I am hoping to learn how God is calling, equipping, supporting, encouraging, and using leaders in smaller congregations facing decline and/or transition. I appreciate the support and funding for this event from the Montana Synod.

Though it is not required for participation in this conference, I invite you to participate in this research by filling out the enclosed baseline and end line questionnaires. These questionnaires are designed to measure the impact of attending this conference on your feelings of confidence, support, and encouragement you are experiencing in your current ministry. Your completion and returning of both questionnaires is your implied consent. Your responses will be treated confidentially. Your participant ID number will be used on the questionnaires to pair baseline and end line responses.

Both questionnaires are very brief and should take ten minutes or less to complete. Again, your participation is entirely voluntary and confidential and does not prejudice your future relationships with the Montana Synod or Luther Seminary. You are free to discontinue your participation in this research at any time without prejudice. If you have any questions, please ask me during this conference, or contact me at any time via e-mail, xxxxx@gmail.com, or by phone, 406-XXX-XXXX.

No animals were or will be harmed in the conducting of this research.

Thank you,

Rev. Doug Peterson

APPENDIX H

Baseline/End Line Questionnaire for WDNLH 2.0

Please fill out this questionnaire at the beginning/end of the conference. Be sure to include your participant ID number listed in your conference folder.

Demographics

1. Participant ID number (inside your folder)
2. Denomination (check all that apply)
 - a. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
 - b. Other: _____
3. Ministry Context (check all that apply)
 - a. Single point parish
 - b. Multi-point parish
 - c. Other: _____
4. Ordination/Certification Year: _____
5. Birth Year: _____

Baseline/End line

6. Overall, how confident do you feel in your ministry? (mark only one oval)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

No Confidence

Extremely Confident

7. Overall, how supported do you feel in your ministry? (mark only one oval)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

No support

Fully supported

8. Overall, how encouraged do you feel in your ministry?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Very discouraged

Very encouraged

9. Second Corinthians 4:1 says “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.” What is God saying to you in this passage today?

10. Additional Comments

APPENDIX I

We Do Not Lose Heart Conference

Thursday-Friday, March 1-2, 2018

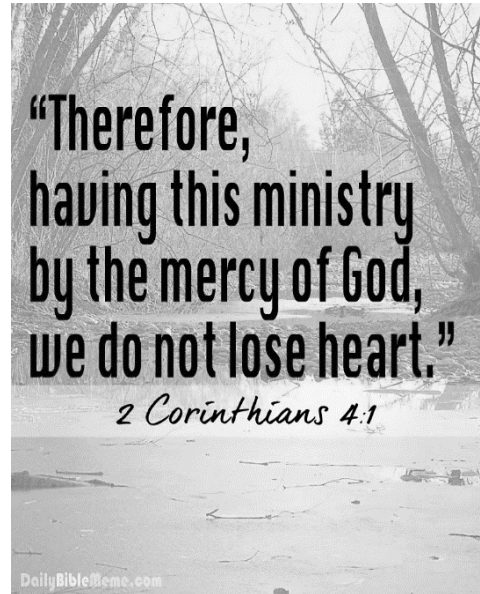
Yogo Inn, Lewistown, Montana

Thursday, March 1st, 2018

- 1:00-2:00pm Registration
2:00 Opening Worship
2:15 Dwelling in the Word: 2
Corinthians 4
3:00 Our Current Context: What in the
world is going on these days?
3:45 Break
4:00 Our Current Ministry: What in the world is God doing in our
congregations?
4:45 Our Current Calling: Why in the world has God given us this ministry?
5:30 Dinner
6:45-8:15 Workshops
- Strategic Planning in Times of Transition
 - Anticipatory Grief and the Congregation
 - Family Systems in Congregational Leadership
 - Assessing Your Congregation's Vitality
- 8:30 Closing Worship

Friday, March 2nd, 2018

- 8:00am Morning Prayer
8:15am Hospice Principles and Missional Churches
9:00am Break
9:15-10:45 Workshops
1. Strategic Planning in Times of Transition
 2. Anticipatory Grief and the Congregation
 3. Family Systems in Congregational Leadership
 4. Assessing Your Congregation's Vitality



11:00am	Networking
11:45am	Closing Prayer

APPENDIX J

Dwelling in the Word

Dwelling in the Word¹ is a practice that may be used to help in communal discernment. It is an intentional practice...hopefully, a habit. It involves:

- Reflection
- Deep listening to one another AND to God's Word
- Patience
- Faith...that God will be revealed, and that the Spirit will guide us

Process

Opening prayer. Facilitator asks a member of the group to open with a brief prayer.

Read. Facilitator asks two different people read the (same) passage out loud. Allow a few moments between readings.

Reflect silently on the passage for **two minutes**. You can write notes if you want.

Share. Pair up with a friendly looking stranger (or a strange looking friend!) Each of you will have **four minutes** (the group should assign a timekeeper) to tell your partner your response to these two questions:

What word, phrase, or idea captured your attention?

What question might you want to ask a biblical scholar² about this passage?

Listen. This is the hard part. LISTEN to what your partner tells you, because you will give a **one-minute** summary report to the group what you heard your partner say about the passage. You can take notes if you want.

Report. Tell the rest of the group a one-minute summary of what you heard your partner say. Try not to express your own thoughts, but, rather, those of your partner.

Reflect. After everyone has reported to the group, we will reflect together:

What might God be saying in this passage to you/us today?

What might God be inviting you/us to do in response to God's word?

Closing Prayer.

¹ Church Innovations, "Dwelling in the Word."

² This "biblical scholar" is not in the group. The point is to wonder and ask the question, not come up with an answer. As the old rabbi once said: "That's such a good question—I hate to spoil it with an answer!"

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