4-2019

The Lived Experiences of Pastors and Lay-Leaders in Rural Missouri Assembly of God Turnaround Churches: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Danny W. Davis
Concordia University - Portland

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Yvette Ghormley, Ph.D., Content Reader

The Lived Experiences of Pastors and Lay Leaders in Turnaround Rural Assembly of God

Churches in Missouri: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Danny Wade Davis

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Transformational Leadership

William Boozang, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

Brianna Parsons, Ed.D., Content Specialist

Yvette Ghormley, Ph.D., Content Reader

Concordia University–Portland

2019

Abstract

Scholars estimate 65% to 80% of all churches in the United States are either plateauing or declining in membership. Thousands of churches close in the United States each year, many are rural communities. However, some leaders of plateauing and declining churches do turn around their diminishing assemblies. The researcher used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. Rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround pastors and lay leaders experienced a common pattern of turnaround and used common language to describe their experiences. The research confirmed that rural Missouri turnaround pastors are transformational leaders. Revitalizing pastors in this study led by example, showed transparency about church problems, established new expectations of attendees through vision, appealed to a higher cause when casting a vision for change, used crises to build trust with followers, and prioritized relationship building. Lay leaders were positively affected by the leadership of the turnaround pastor and felt empowered to minister, trusted their pastor to coach them to success, sacrificed time and energy because they believed in the pastor's vision, and developed a deep trust in their pastors. The qualities of a turnaround pastor provided a rubric through which denominational and church network leaders can assess potential pastoral candidates. The qualities provide an evaluative tool for self-assessment by pastors considering leading a dying church to health. The four follower effects discussed in this study demonstrate how turnaround pastors positively influence lay leaders to engage fully in the revitalization journey.

Keywords: church turnaround, church revitalization, rural, rural church, Missouri, Assembly of God, transformational leadership, follower effects, church leadership, church health, declining and plateauing churches

Dedication

To my wife, Sherry Davis, who stood beside me through this entire academic journey. Your love, encouragement, and support for me in the process is immeasurable. I love you Sherry!

To my sons, Logan and Dylan Davis, you make me proud to be a dad. Your future is bright. Use all your gifts and talents to glorify God and fulfill His purpose for your lives.

Acknowledgement

To the pastors and lay leaders who participated in this study, thank you. Your honesty and candor about the realities of rural church turnaround will influence the readers of this work to take bold steps of faith for Christ. Never give up believing that dead things can live again.

To my faculty chair, Dr. William Boozang, thank you for your encouragement, insight, and guidance throughout this entire dissertation process. To Drs Ghormley and Parsons, thank you for your input, critique, and encouragement to keep writing, thinking, and questioning.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My interest in the topic of rural church turnaround is both personal and professional. After serving 10 years as a church planter, pastor, and professor in Johannesburg, South Africa, my family and I moved to a small rural town in Western Missouri. The town has a population of 5,300 compared to Johannesburg's multiple millions. My denominational leaders asked me to consider assuming the pastorate of an established but dying church in the town. After visiting the town and meeting the congregants, I accepted that call. Since 2013, I along with a faithful group of lay leaders, have clumsily led the church to its initial stages of health and vitality.

Investigating the phenomenon of rural church turnaround fills a large hole in the literature. Studies about church revitalization have focused primarily on the leadership qualities of pastors. The role of lay leaders is often mentioned but not well defined in the literature. By exploring the relationship of pastors and lay leaders who have successfully led a rural church to turnaround a gap is filled in the literature.

Chapter 1 offers an introduction to my research. It opens by describing the background of church plateau and decline in rural churches. A statement of the problem outlines the need for strong pastoral and lay leadership to lead plateauing and declining churches to a turnaround. A primary research question is listed to guide the exploration of this phenomenon. Next, a conceptual framework is offered that guides how the researcher will explore the lived experiences of rural Missouri Assembly of God church pastors and leaders who have successfully led their churches from decline to growth. A summary of the nature of my choice of a qualitative research method is explicated and the significance it has for denominational leaders, church organizations, and other pastors and leaders is explained. Finally, some delimitations, limitations and assumptions are discussed, and key terms defined.

Background

Religious researchers estimate that 65% to 80% of all churches in the United States are either plateaued or in decline (Clarensau, 2017; Houseal, 2018; Rainer, 2017). The Hartford Institute for Religion Research identified a total of 318,840 Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox congregations in the United States ("U.S. Religious Census," 2010). The Assembly of God reports that 33% of their 13,004 churches are in towns with populations of less than 5,000 (S. Doty, personal communication July 31, 2018). Rural church attendance is in sharp decline making it hard for churches to sustain the mission of God. According to the *National Congregations Study* (2012) church attendance in rural areas has dropped from 43.4% in 1998 to 31.7% in 2012. This attendance decrease is precipitated by steep population declines in rural areas (Cromartie, 2017).

Much church decline arises from the rapid depopulation of rural areas in the United States (Miller, 2014). Cromartie (2013) stated, "for the first time, rural counties as a whole are declining in population" (p. 6). Since the 1970s, young adults have steadily migrated out of rural areas in search of better social, economic, and educational opportunities. The migration of young adults from rural to urban/suburban areas has caused church planting organizations to place heavy emphasis on starting new churches in urban/suburban areas. Nevertheless, the rural church still exists but has largely been forgotten by denominations and networks whose scorecard for success revolves around "bodies, budgets, and buildings" (Stetzer & Rainer, 2010, p. 28). Rural churches continue to plateau, or experience decline. To stay alive, they need strong pastoral and lay leadership to help them turnaround. This hermeneutic phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders who led their plateauing or declining rural church to a turnaround.

Statement of the Problem

Rural churches are feeling the impact of population decline finding it difficult to sustain the mission of God. "Many of the 7,000 churches that close each year in America are in rural settings. Thousands more are either in decline or struggling to survive" (Russell, 2014, p. 36). To reverse the trend toward death, rural churches require "intentional intervention and transformational change" (Russell, 2014, p. 36). The researcher employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of church leaders who have intervened and brought about transformational change in their dying rural church.

Research Question

Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study explores the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God churches that have experienced turnaround. The primary research question is:

RQ$_1$:   What are the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of churches in rural

Missouri Assembly of God churches who have led their churches to turnaround

after experiencing a plateau or decline in attendance?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presents four interpretive lenses that inform the researcher's investigation of the phenomenon of rural church turnaround. The first lens is wide focusing on church plateau, decline, and turnaround in general. Churches, like other organizations, have a typical life cycle. They begin with a dream and typically die within five decades (Ross, 2013). The second lens takes a wide look at the concept of rural and explores that concept by reviewing the literature associated with its geographical and demographic realities. The answer to the question, "What is rural," is complex and multi-faceted because it is both quantitative and

qualitative concept. "Rural definitions can be based on administrative, land-use, or economic concepts, exhibiting considerable variation in socio-economic characteristics and well-being of the measured population" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008, para. 1). Depending on which of the 24 definitions used, the percentage of United States residents living in rural areas ranges from 17% to 49% (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008).

The third lens narrows the focus by looking at qualities of turnaround pastors and how those qualities impact followers. Most Christian churches are led by pastors. Assembly of God churches place a heavy emphasis on the pastor being the primary vision caster for the local church. Consequently, the decline or growth of a local church is often attributed to the leadership ability of the pastor even when other factors, out of the pastor's control, are obvious. Stetzer and Dodson (2007) insist that strong leadership is required for a church turnaround. Strong leadership is a qualitative term describing a multitude of leadership actions. The fourth lens narrows the focus more by examining the priorities of rural church leaders . These lenses form a hermeneutic through which the researcher approaches the study of church turnaround.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches that were in plateau or decline but have experienced a turnaround. A *turnaround church* is defined as one which plateaued or declined in average worship attendance over an extended period but reversed the trend and experienced growth. Churches whose leaders have led them through the phenomenon of turnaround are sometimes called *comeback* or *revitalized churches* (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Mays, 2011). This study seeks to understand the nature of the turnaround as experienced by pastors and lay leaders in various rural Missouri Assembly of God church settings.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study utilizes a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research how pastors and lay leaders experienced church turnaround in a rural congregation. The study does not attempt to provide a pure or generalized description of the phenomenon. Instead, it pursues an understanding of the phenomenon through a reflective-interpretive process (Annells, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). Rural pastors are facing difficulties keeping their churches viable in the face of urbanization. The focus of the research is on the experiences of rural Assembly of God congregations in Missouri. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach permits the researcher to present rich descriptions of the experiences of pastors and lay leaders about each other and their turnaround experience as they lived it.

Significance of the Study

Plateau and decline of churches in the United States is a significant issue that should be explored. The largest evangelical denomination in the United States reports 65% of their churches are plateaued or in decline (Rainer, 2017). The Church of the Nazarene reports 51% of its churches declined in 2017 (R. Houseal, personal communication, February 15, 2018). My own denomination, The Assembly of God, reports 70% of its United States congregations plateaued or declined between 2012–2017 (Clarensau, 2017). Clarensau (2017) defines growth, plateau, and decline of Assembly of God churches in the following manner: a growing church has an increase of 10% or more; a plateaued church neither grew or declined more than 10%, and a declining church loses 10% of more of its members over a five-year period (Clarensau, 2017). Clarensau (2017) reports that 82% of Assembly of God churches have less than 200 members and 70.2% of those churches are plateaued or in decline. Doty (personal communication, July

31, 2018) reports that 33% of Assembly of God churches in the United States are located in towns with populations of 5,000 or less.

The Southern Missouri District Council of the Assembly of God reports a total of 360 local congregations in all counties south of the Missouri river (N. Cook, personal communication August 3, 2018). Of those local congregations, 46% are in cities with populations of 5,000 people or less. On average these 163 churches have experienced an overall decline of 12% in attendance from 2012–2017 (N. Cook, personal communication August 3, 2018). Nationally a large portion of Assembly of God churches are declining in attendance. The data reflects a national and statewide trend of decline in many Assembly of God churches. Those churches located in areas with small populations are experiencing decline and require intervention to reverse the trend.

Insight given into the experiences of rural Assembly of God church pastors and lay leaders in Missouri who have reversed the trend of decline offers denominational leaders with a rich description of the challenges and joys of rural church turnaround. The study does not seek to create models or strategic plans for church turnaround. Instead, the researcher attempts to put into words the unique experiences of pastors and lay leaders. The experiences of the participants can help other pastors and lay leaders desiring to lead their congregations to a turnaround. Church turnaround is in large part a process of cultural change. Churches in decline tend to turn inward and go into survival mode. Moving congregations from an inward culture of self-preservation to a one of vision for growth always necessitates radical change. Those changes create tension among pastors and lay leaders as they work through the implementation of and resistance to change. The study fills a gap in the literature relating to church revitalization by focusing on the relationship between pastors and lay leaders of rural churches who have led their

churches to a turnaround. The researcher fully expects to present findings that will help future

church leaders navigate their own journey to turnaround.

Definition of Terms

A list of definitions for this study is provided below.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: "a human science that studies persons" (Van Manen,

1990, p. 6) and is "concerned with the life world or human experience as it is lived" (Laverty,

2004, p. 24). Also known as "interpretive phenomenology."

Lay leaders: volunteer members of the pastoral leadership team who play a significant

role in helping lead a plateauing or declining rural church to a turnaround (Costner, 2017).

Pastor: from the Greek noun ποιμήν (poi-mā'n) most often translated as *shepherd* and

used metaphorically to describe a person who equips Christian believers through preaching and

teaching, guides the spiritual direction of a congregation, and oversees the administration of the

local church (Maybue, 2005).

Rural: "all population[s], housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or

urban cluster" (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, & Field, 2016, p. 3).

Rural Church: a local assembly of people who embrace the historical and orthodox tenets

of the Christian faith and meet in a rural area within the geographical boundaries of the United

States.

Transformational Leaders: leaders who focus on achieving mutually shared goals above

their own self-interests by casting vision with clarity and influencing followers to share in that

vision by promoting follower creativity and innovation (Burns, 1978; Hughes, 2014; Judge &

Piccolo, 2004; Rowold, 2008; Podsakof, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990).

Turnaround Church: a church that has plateaued or declined in average worship attendance over an extended period but has reversed the trend and experienced growth; also referred to as revitalization or comeback (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Mays, 2011).

Turnaround Pastor: a pastor who has led a plateauing or declining church to a turnaround.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

For this study, the researcher intended to provide a voice for rural Missouri Assembly of God pastors and lay leaders who led their dying congregations back to health. It was assumed participating pastors and lay leaders answered interview questions honestly. The literature suggests that rural congregations in the United States are led differently than their metropolitan counterparts (Carney, 2010; McIntosh, 1999; Sprayberry, 2010). Rural and non-rural pastors identified the same five essential pastoral tasks: "visionary leadership, dynamic preaching, multi-generational discipleship, biblical knowledge, and culturally relevant outreach" (Carney, 2010, p. 100). However, rural pastors ranked these tasks differently focusing on how the tasks could be accomplished relationally (Carney, 2010; Sprayberry, 2010). Consequently, the researcher assumed the rural church leaders participating in this study went about the process of turnaround differently. Small churches rely heavily on members instead of paid staff to lead ministries and perform administrative functions. As such, rural pastors lean heavily on lay leaders. Hagiya (2011) and Costner (2017) underscore the necessity of healthy relationships between pastors and lay leaders in church turnaround.

The scope of the research is delimited to rural churches that have declined in worship attendance but have experienced growth. Church decline is sometimes measured quantitatively. A church having -2.5% decline in actual attendance over a five-year period is declining (Costner,

2017; Martin, 2015; Penfold, 2011; Stetzer & Rainer, 2007). Other researchers describe church decline qualitatively. Pastors and lay leaders intuitively speak of losing members and entering a type of survival mentality (Mays, 2011; Ross, 2013). Decline of rural populations has inevitably led to decline in the rural church (Russell, 2014). However, the 46 million people who still reside in rural USA deserve a healthy and vibrant churches (Cromartie, 2017).

A second delimitation is the narrow investigation of rural Assembly of God turnaround churches in Missouri. Missouri is a vastly rural state with 101 of its 114 counties classified as rural (Van Dyne, et al., 2017). The Southern Missouri District Council of the Assembly of God reports a total of 360 local congregations in all counties south of the Missouri river (N. Cook, personal communication August 3, 2018). Of those local congregations, 46% are in cities with populations of 5,000 people or less. On average these 163 churches have experienced an overall decline of 12% in attendance from 2012–2017 (N. Cook, personal communication August 3, 2018). Clarensau (2017) indicates Assembly of God churches having a 10% decrease in a five-year period are considered declining. As a group, Southern Missouri Assembly of God churches located in towns with populations of 5,000 or less require intervention to reverse the cycle of decline. Church turnaround of any kind is rare (Martin, 2015; McEachin, 2011; Stroh, 2014) but it does occur, and those rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches are the subject of the research.

This study was limited to a small sample size of 13 pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. The small sample size precludes this research from being generalized to larger populations. A second limitation arose by allowing participating pastors to choose lay leaders for the study. My unfamiliarity with participating church's members prevented me from knowing the appropriate leaders to choose. Pastoral

selection of lay leaders may be biased toward those people who portray him or her in an overly positive light.

Chapter 1 Summary

This introduction offered an overview of the reasons for and the framework guiding this research. The problem was identified, and the research question was listed to demonstrate the researcher's purposeful goal of understanding lived experiences among research subjects. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of rural pastors and lay leaders who led their church to a turnaround. The conceptual framework described four interpretive lenses undergirding the research of the phenomenon of rural church turnaround. The nature and significance of the study were offered to show how employing a qualitative research method provided scholarly and valuable data for church leaders. Chapter 1 also introduced and defined key terms, explored assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Church revitalization research primarily concentrates on the discovery and definition of the qualities of pastoral leaders who have led churches to health (Butler & Herman, 1999; Carter, 2009; Montgomery, 2009; Stetzer, 2007). Additionally, the literature draws attention to cultural and demographic causes of church stagnation and death. The goal of this literature review is twofold. First, it offers a broad psychological model of the qualities of turnaround pastors. These traits models provide ecclesiastical leaders, pulpit committees, and others tasked with selecting local pastors, a profile of candidates who might shine in leading dying churches to new life. Second, the literature provides a generalized picture of causes for a decline to form a metric for gauging the scope of work necessary to reinvigorate a dying church. There is a scarcity of literature examining how the relationship between pastor and lay leaders impacts a churches ability to turnaround. The literature pays little attention to the role of lay leaders who assist in stimulating and championing the necessary changes of revitalization.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented four interpretive lenses that informed the researcher's investigation of the phenomenon of rural church turnaround. The first lens looked broadly at church plateau, decline, and turnaround through an ecclesiastical context. Churches, like other organizations, have a typical life cycle. They begin with a dream and typically die within five decades (Ross, 2014). The literature pertaining to church growth and decline abounds. The first lens, however, focuses on specific data relating to how growth and decline is measured in an ecclesiastical context including the Assembly of God. Furthermore, this lens explored the biblical role that pastors and lay leaders have in leading their churches.

The second lens took a wide look at the concept of rural and explored that concept by reviewing the literature associated with its geographical and demographic realities. This lens sought to bring clarity to the complex subject of what "rural" means. Government agencies have no less than 24 different definitions for "rural" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008). "Rural definitions can be based on administrative, land-use, or economic concepts, exhibiting considerable variation in socio-economic characteristics and well-being of the measured population" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008, para. 1). This study focused on "rural" churches. As such, this lens examined the literature to arrive at a definition of rural that aided the researcher in identifying appropriate churches for the study. Additionally, the second lens investigated the social and economic realities of those living in rural areas. By exploring the literature pertaining to demographic shifts from rural to urban, this lens helped provide insight into the challenges rural churches are facing that might impact the health of the church. The first and second lenses of this study provided a contextual framework undergirding this study. The third and fourth lenses looked at the qualities of leaders who revitalized rural churches in plateau and decline.

The third lens narrowed the focus of this project by looking at qualities of turnaround pastors and how those qualities effected followers. Transformational leadership theory shapes this lens and helped identify characteristics of turnaround pastors and lay leaders. Most Christian churches are led by pastors. Assembly of God churches place a heavy emphasis on the pastor being the primary vision caster for the local church. Consequently, the decline or growth of a local church is often attributed to the leadership ability of the pastor (even when other factors, out of the pastor's control, are obvious). Stetzer and Dodson (2007) insist that strong leadership is required for a church turnaround. Strong leadership is a qualitative term describing a multitude of leadership actions. This lens examined the literature to uncover specific qualities

demonstrated by church leaders in a turnaround context. The qualities presented in the literature assisted the researcher in forming a conceptual understanding of those qualities that appeared in the leadership of turnaround pastors.

The fourth lens narrowed the focus more by examining the priorities of rural church leaders. This lens investigated the literature to understand how rural churches establish leadership priorities. Some plateauing and declining churches do experience turnaround. This lens looked at the literature and what priorities were most important for successfully revitalizing rural churches. Furthermore, this lens investigated the literature to specifically understand how lay leaders influenced the creation of leadership priorities as they worked with the turnaround pastor. The four lenses of the conceptual framework formed a hermeneutic through which the researcher approached the phenomenon of rural church turnaround (see Figure 1)
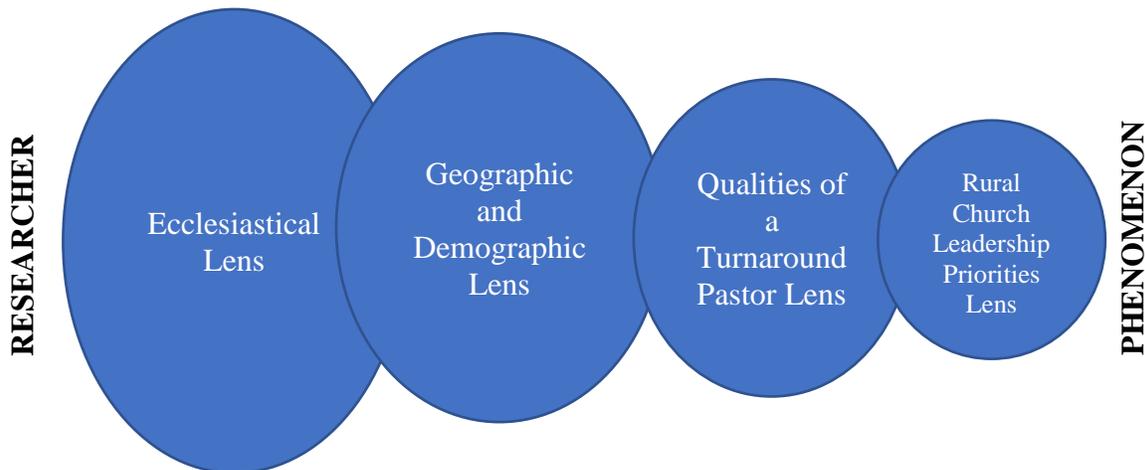
Figure 1. Visual representation of conceptual framework.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

Search strategy. This project explores the convergence of several topics relevant to church turnaround in a rural context: church plateau, decline, and turnaround; defining rural in the United States; qualities of transformational leaders; qualities of turnaround pastors and the effects on lay leaders; rural church leadership priorities. I conducted research using ProQuest,

JSTOR, ERIC, ARDA, United States Census Bureau, and ATLA databases, as well as Google

Scholar. I also communicated directly with denominational representatives to gather specific

information regarding church plateau and decline within their organizations. Keywords included

rural America, rural church, small-town church, challenges in rural America, social problems in

rural America, defining rural, transformational leadership theory, charismatic leadership theory,

leader-member exchange (LMX), transformational leadership, transformational pastor, church

revitalization, church turnaround, church comeback, effective lay leaders, revitalization and lay

leaders, high-capacity lay leaders, rural Missouri, population statistics rural Missouri, and factors

for rural decline in Missouri.

Church plateau, decline, and turnaround. Small church buildings line the landscape

of rural locations across the United States. Those buildings housed congregations of people who

faithfully met each Sunday to worship God and fellowship with one another. Churches in rural

communities acted as the center of spiritual life for multiple generations (Smith, Haley, Grenade,

& Kerr, 2018). For many, the country church was the place where they got married, formed their

children's spirituality, buried their loved ones, and participated in multitudes of pot-luck dinners.

However, demographic shifts in the United States from rural to urban have negatively impacted

the rural church's ability to sustain its mission (Boehn van Harmelen, 2008; Johnson, 2006).

Church growth literature presents a bleak picture of the number of churches plateaued or

declining in the United States. Rainer (2017) asserted that 65% of Southern Baptist Churches are

plateaued or declining. His research of 1,000 Southern Baptist congregations focused on average

church attendance instead of membership. Stetzer (2007) estimated 70%–80% of churches in

North America are "stagnant or declining" (p. 19). The General Council of the Assemblies of

God reports that 70% of its churches in the United States are plateaued or declining (S. Doty,

14

personal communication, July 27, 2018). The Church of the Nazarene reports 51% of its

churches declined in 2017 (R. Houseal, personal communication, February 15, 2018). The

literature is clear that churches in general are declining in attendance and require bold leadership

to turn them around.

According to the *National Congregations Study* (2012) church attendance in rural areas

has dropped from 43.4% in 1998 to 31.7% in 2012. This drop is attributed to "annual population

losses [of] 48,000 per year between 2010–11 and 2014–15" (Cromartie, 2017, para. 4). The

migration of people away from rural areas has the inevitable result of congregational decline.

Russell (2014) stated,

> Rural churches in America have suffered with their communities. Many of the 7000
>
> churches that close each year in America are in rural settings. Thousands more are either
>
> in decline or struggling to survive […] Despite these negative influences, some rural
>
> churches are experiencing revitalization. Intentional intervention and transformational
>
> change, however, is required of any congregation seeking a turnaround. (p. 36)

There are still 46 million people living in the rural areas of the United States (Cromartie, 2017)

who deserve a life-giving church. Hoskins (2017) claimed that 75% of people living in rural

America do not attend church. If that claim is valid, then rural churches have a leadership

problem. Hunt (2016) states, "The lack of leadership in today's churches, especially the smaller

rural churches, has caused all kinds of problems which have stagnated a healthy growth of the

church" (p. 7). A plateauing or declining church needs strong pastoral and lay leadership to

return to health and vitality.

The Southern Missouri District Council of the Assembly of God reported a total of 360

local congregations in all counties south of the Missouri river (N. Cook, personal

communication August 3, 2018). Of those local congregations, 46% were in cities with

populations of 5,000 people or less. On average these 163 churches experienced an overall

decline of 12% in attendance from 2012–2017 (N. Cook, personal communication August 3,

2018). As a group, Southern Missouri Assembly of God churches located in towns with

populations of 5,000 or less required intervention to reverse the cycle of decline. Church

turnaround of any kind is rare (Martin, 2015; McEachin, 2011; Stroh, 2014) but it does occur,

and those rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches are the subject of this research

project.

Pastoral leadership is biblical and necessary for any local church desiring to move from

stagnation to health. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes a five-fold ministry model

instituted by Christ for equipping Christ-followers for "works of service" (Ephesians 4:11–12

New International Version). The characters in the Ephesians leadership model are apostles,

prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Pastors are vital to a local assembly and its ability to

carry out the mission of God.

Maybue (2005) details five New Testament words used to describe the functional roles of

a pastor: elder, bishop, shepherd, preacher, and teacher. These descriptions highlight three

biblical qualities of a pastoral leader. First, a pastor is intentionally involved in the betterment of

those who are under her or his care through preaching and teaching. Second, pastors guide the

spiritual direction of a local church like a shepherd leads sheep. Third, pastors are to be overseers

of a local church's administrative needs as elder and bishop. These three qualities serve one goal:

the equipping of Christ followers for "works of service" (Ephesians 4:12a). That goal leads to an

expected result: "the body of Christ [being] built up" (Ephesians 4:12b).

Paul also teaches that at conversion all Christ-followers are given gifts by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–5; 1 Peter 4:10; Romans 12:4–6a). Pastors are responsible for helping believers discover the gifts they have received from the Holy Spirit. Then, through various pedagogical means, pastors help believers develop their gifts for the benefit of the local assembly and the global Body of Christ. Pastoral ministry includes caring for and teaching Christ-followers in a local context. Pastors are, for lack of a better term, the boots on the ground in assisting church members discover and utilize the gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit.

Turnaround pastors understand their biblical role as one who equips lay leaders who become partners in revitalizing a dying church. The researcher seeks to explore the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders who have brought their plateauing and declining churches back to health. This process is called turnaround or revitalization. Churches that have moved from stagnation to growth are called "turnaround churches" (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Mays, 2011). How can a church needing turnaround be identified?

The literature provides a quantitative and qualitative description of churches in plateau or decline. A plateauing church is flat in it worship attendance, having neither grown nor declined over a five-year period. Clarensau (2017) defines plateau for Assembly of God churches as those that did not grow more than 10% or decline more than 10% over a five-year period. Stetzer and Dodson (2007) define a declining church as having 10% or less growth over a five-year period. Martin (2015) states that churches with at least a 5% decline in average attendance during a ten-year period are declining, Costner (2017) and Penfold (2011) define a declining church as one having an average annual growth rate of -2.5% over a five-year period. Church decline, whether viewed as decadal, over a five-year period or annually, consistently remains at 2.5%.

The literature shows that decline is measured by actual worship attendance not church membership (Costner, 2017; Clarensau, 2017; Martin, 2015, Penfold, 2011; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007). Rainer (2017) states "church membership is fast becoming a meaningless metric" (para. 7). Churches are reticent to remove members from their rolls even though those members have not attended a worship service for an extended period. Other researchers define plateau and decline qualitatively. Mays (2011) speaks of churches having "lost momentum" or "had steep decline" (p. 9). Ross (2013) describes his own church's decline as entering into an attitude of "mere survival" (p. 4). The literature reveals that church decline can be quantitatively measured and qualitatively observed.

In 2013, I became the pastor of a rural church in sharp decline. In less than 10 years, the church went from 200 in weekly attendance to less than 20. I know the temptation to avoid quantitative measurement. When pastors get together the favorite question is, "How many people did you have on Sunday?" Unfortunately, pastoral success is frequently and unfairly measured by worship attendance numbers. *The National Congregations Survey* (2012) reveals the average church in the United States has about 75 weekly worshipers. Even considering this reality, leaders of declining churches feel shamed by their situation and resist taking nose counts each week (Vaters, 2018). The thought is that if the counting stops, so too does the feeling of failure. Pastors often avoid speaking of decline by measuring attendance based the high attendance days like Easter or Christmas. Nevertheless, a negative or dismissive attitude toward quantitative data like attendance only delays turnaround because it refuses to face reality.

Turnaround is also quantitatively measured and qualitatively observed. A turnaround church grows in actual attendance annually by 2.5% over a period of five-years (Costner, 2017; Penfold, 2011; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007). Again, qualitative language is employed in the

literature to describe church turnaround. Summarily a turnaround church is one that saw decline then an increase in actual worship attendance (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Lamb, 2016; Mays, 2011).

Defining Rural in the United States. What constitutes "rural" in the United States is a complex and multilayered definition. Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008) state that various federal agencies in the U.S. currently use 24 different definitions to determine if an area is rural. "Rural definitions can be based on administrative, land-use, or economic concepts, exhibiting considerable variation in socio-economic characteristics and well-being of the measured population" (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008, para. 1). Depending on which of the 24 definitions used, the percentage of people living in rural areas of the United States ranges from 17% to 49% (Cromartie & Bucholtz, 2008).

The U.S. Census Bureau utilizes the following definition to describe a rural location: "any population, housing, or territory not in an urban center" ("Story Map Series," n.d.). Using this definition results in 97% of the United States population being in rural areas ("New Census Data Show," 2016). Urban areas, according to the United States Census Bureau, are those areas with populations of 50,000 or more ("Defining Rural Population," 2017). Cromartie and Parker (2017) define rural as "areas compris[ing] open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents" (para. 7). These definitions have led to the creation of the term *urban cluster* to describe locations with populations between 2,500 and 50,000 residents (Ratcliffe et al., 2016).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administrates a home mortgage program for those living in rural areas called Rural Development. If located in an eligible rural community, buyers may qualify for a Rural Development Loan. The 2014 Farm Bill employs the following definition of rural, "areas with population up to 35,000 and rural in character." What is meant by

"rural in character?" That ambiguous phrase led to a 2015 temporary suspension of rural in character determinations ("Frequently Asked Questions," 2015). The National Association of Realtors reports that new criteria for rural in character determinations were created and published as of October 2017 (Harris, Booth, & Siddiqi, 2017). Locations qualifying as rural in character have "a population between 2,500 and 10,000" (Harris et al., 2017, para. 2). Population size is only one piece of the definitional puzzle. The second definitional piece pertains to how rural areas compare to urban areas in population density and infrastructure.

An urban area is large and densely populated, is built up (e.g., paved roads, airports, incorporated business), and people live close each other (Ratcliffe, et al., 2016). Rural areas are less dense and sparsely populated, are not built up, and are at a distance to urban areas (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). In other words, rural is defined by what is it not. "[A]fter defining individual urban areas, rural is what is left" (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Demographer Kenneth Johnson (2017) describes "what is left" like this:

> It includes manufacturing parks, warehouses, and food processing plants strung along rural interstates; sprawling exurban expanses just beyond the outer edge of the nation's largest metropolitan areas; regions where generations have labored to extract, process and ship coal, ore, oil and gas to customers near and far; timber and pulp mills deep in rural forests; industrial towns struggling to retain jobs in the face of intense global competition; and fast-growing recreational areas proximate to mountains, lakes and coastlines. (para. 3)

Rural communities in the United States are currently experiencing depopulation (Miller, 2014). Johnson (2006) estimates 40% of all rural counties in the United States have experienced "natural decrease since 2000" (p. 15). The 1970s and 1990s were two decades of "rural

rebound" with population increases (Johnson, 2006). However, Miller (2014) and Cromartie (2013) insist rural counties are currently experiencing depopulation. The few rural counties in the United States experiencing growth are located near urban centers or provide "recreation, amenity, or retirement opportunities" that attract newcomers (Johnson, 2006; Whitner & McGranahan, 2003).

The demographic shift from rural to urban creates numerous challenges for pastoral and lay leaders of rural congregations. Rural communities have experienced a "protracted outflow of young adults" since the 1970's resulting in aging rural congregations (Brandsrud, 2017; Farley, Bennet, Giles, & Parks, 2005; Johnson, 2006). *The Rural Matters Institute* offers a host of reasons for the out-migration of young adults from rural areas (2017). Poverty: 16.2% of adults and 23% of children live at or below the poverty line ("Rural Matters," 2017). Education: rural schools often perform below average on national educational assessments ("Rural Matters," 2017). Mental Health Services: two-thirds of rural communities have a shortage of qualified mental health professionals ("Rural Matters," 2017). Political underrepresentation: lawmakers are allocating fewer and fewer federal dollars to rural communities ("Rural Matters," 2017). "[P]eople living in the rural heartland are left underserved and disregarded, despite having the same needs as those in other areas" ("Rural Matters," p. 3). Young adults migrate to urban areas in search of better employment, education, and services.

As young adults exit rural areas, the result is a decline in church membership and finances (Farley, et al., 2005). Ministry departments, once vital to church life, can no longer be staffed or funded (Farley, et al., 2005; McIntosh, 1999). Fewer program offerings make the church less appealing to non-members (McIntosh, 1999). Current church members react to the changing circumstances by turning inward and becoming less welcoming of newcomers

(McIntosh, 1999). To maintain the church of their memory, members idolize the status quo, close ranks, and enter survival mode (McIntosh, 1999). The perfect storm of loss and nostalgia results in rural church stagnation, decline, and the death of rural churches.

Ethnically, the rural United States are still predominantly White but is becoming more racially diverse through in-migration. Between the years of 1990–2004, the number of Hispanics living in rural areas of the United States nearly doubled (Kandle & Cromartie, 2004; Johnson, 2006). There were also slight increases in the numbers of African-American and non-Hispanic Whites. Ethnic in-migration, however, does not offset the out-migration of people under the age of 20. This out-migration of young adults has led to a declining birth rate in most rural areas (Boehm Van Harmelen, 2008; Johnson, 2006; McGranahan & Beale, 2002).

Based on a review of the literature, the researcher will utilize the following qualitative definition of rural, "all population[s], housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster" (Ratcliffe, et al., 2016, p. 3). This definition allows the researcher to explore different settings with varying populations. It also creates a large enough pool from which to recruit study participants through purposive sampling.

Missouri's rural population is declining for many of the same reasons as the rest of the United States. The state of Missouri contains 114 counties and 101 of those counties are considered rural (Van Dyne, et al., 2017). Missouri is the seventeenth largest state of the United States with a population of over six million. Over one half of Missouri's population lives in urban centers. However, 36.6% of Missourian's live in rural locations (Van Dyne, et al., 2017). Of the 101 rural counties in Missouri, 51 experienced population decline between 2005 and 2015 (Van Dyne, et al., 2017). The remaining 50 counties saw no change or a slight increase in population during the same period (Van Dyne, 2017).

The Missouri River serves as the boundary demarcating Nothern and Southern Missouri. For more than 100 years counties in the north have declined in population. "Several north Missouri counties had three or four times as many people in 1900 as they did in 2010. Almost all north Missouri counties have experienced significant population loss through the 20th Century and into the 21st" (Herrold, 2017, para. 6). Herrold (2017) and Mercer (2012) suggest a multitude of factors for rural population decline in Missouri: advances in agriculture, an older non-child bearing population, out-migration of a younger population looking for better employment, and a lack of doctors and hospitals.

Qualities of turnaround pastors and their effects on lay leaders. The concept of transformational leadership was introduced in the book Leadership by James McGregor Burns (1978). This leadership theory is helpful to identifying the qualities of turnaround pastors and their effects on lay leaders. The following section offers an overview of transformational leadership theory in the literature.

Transformational leadership. Burns (1978) theorized that three types of leadership exist: *Laissez-Faire, Transactional,* and *Transforming*. These three leadership styles form a "full range model" of leadership dimensions (Bass & Avolio, 1994). *Laissez-Faire* leaders are the least competent because they take a hands-off approach leaving followers without clear direction. *Transactional* leaders are at the mid-point of the scale and are more effective than *laissez-faire*. They lead by offering various rewards to followers who meet prescribed expectations but are primarily concerned with their own goals and interests. *Transformational* leaders are at the top of the range and are considered the most effective. They focus primarily on achieving mutually shared goals above their self-interests. These leaders cast vision with clarity and influence followers to share in that vision by promoting follower creativity and innovation.

Transactional leaders focus on accomplishing tasks and rewarding followers who assist in completing those tasks. Leader and follower transactions take three forms: contingent reward, passive management-by-exception, and active management-by-exception. Contingent reward finds the leader clearly articulating to the follower the task required and the expected reward (Bass, 1999). Once agreement on the task and reward occurs, the transactional leader passively or actively manages the follower. "Active leaders monitor follower behavior, anticipate problems, and take corrective action. Passive leaders wait until the behavior has created problems before taking action" (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 756). Ultimately, transactional leadership emphasizes the self-interests of the leader, not the follower.

The primary difference between transformational and transactional leadership lies in "what leaders and followers offer one another" (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 755). Hughes (2014) offers a succinct and accurate definition that describing what transformational leader offer followers:

> Primarily focused on the vision and followers, transformational leadership emphasizes follower development and their intrinsic motivation. Transformational leaders are focused on raising the followers to a higher level of performance and consciousness in order to reach the mutual goals of the team, rather than solely for self-interest. (p. 6)

Transformational leaders "possess the ability to inspire followers to go beyond expected levels of commitment and contribution" (Rowold, 2008, p. 404). Implicit in followers going beyond the expected is the element of personal and organizational change. Podsakof, et al (1990) suggest that transformational leadership in any form is meant to change (transform) the "basic values, beliefs, and attitudes of followers" (p. 108). The hopeful result is followers who go above and beyond the expected norms. Bass and Riggio (2006) offer four components of transformational

leadership: idealized influence (sometimes referred to as charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized concern.

Idealized Influence and *Inspirational Motivation* is about vision, motivation, and modeling (Bass, 1999; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). The leader clearly articulates a vision of an optimistic and preferred future. Transformational leaders motivate followers by showing followers how they contribute to, enhance, and share in the vision. Then, the transformational leader models the vision he or she has presented to followers "by behaving in admiral ways that cause followers to identify with the leader" (Judge & Piccolo, 2004, p. 755). *Intellectual Stimulation* occurs when "the leader helps followers to become more innovative and creative" (Bass, 1999, p. 11). *Individualized Consideration* occurs as the leader gives personal time to followers as a coach and mentor to assist them in their growth and development. Ultimately, transformational leaders emphasize the values of followers above their self-interests (Jandaghi, Matin, Zarei & Farjami, 2009).

The literature paints a vivid description of the characteristics of a transformational leader. Transformational leaders influence followers through vision (Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Bradford & Cohen, 1984; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Murphy, 2005; Penn, 2011; Scarborough, 2010; Scuderi, 2010; Tichy & DiVanna, 1986). Transformational leaders demonstrate influence in a variety of ways. Through his or her influence, transformational leaders raise followers to "higher levels" of "motivation and morality" (Burns, 1978), "performance" (Hughes, 2014; Lievens, Van Geit, & Coetsier, 1997), "participation and satisfaction" (McMahan, 1998), "performance and satisfaction" (Hughes, 2014; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; McKinley, 2015; Scuderi, 2010; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

Bass (1985) and Choi (2006) describe a transformational leader as someone who empowers followers. Transformational leaders inspire followers to commit to organizational goals (Penn, 2011). Bass (1985) describes transformational leaders as innovators. Liethwood (1992) summarizes the transformational leader as one who "facilitates the redefinition of a people's mission and vision, a renewal of their commitment, and the restructuring of their systems for goal accomplishment" (p. 9). All the qualities mentioned point to a leader who possesses a dual focus. Transformational leaders are guided by compelling personal and organizational vision. Transformational leaders understand, however, that vision cannot be accomplished alone. Consequently, the transformational leader not only inspires people to help him or her fulfill their vision but empowers and equips followers to become autonomous leaders. The result is leadership multiplication where the primary leader gives away power and authority so that others are brought up and not kept down.

Transformational qualities of turnaround pastors. Revitalizing a plateauing or declining church requires pastors to be transformative leaders. Moving a church from plateau and decline to life and health is a task best suited to pastors who practice transformational leadership. Carter (2009) contends that a transformational leadership style is a central variable found among effective pastors (abstract). Bass (1990) asserts, "among Methodist ministers, transformational – not transactional – leadership was positively related to high church attendance among congregants and growth in church membership" (p. 22). The literature provides excellent insight into the qualities of pastors who successfully lead their congregations to turnaround. Turnaround pastors' model certain attitudinal and behavioral qualities as they lead followers to revitalize their church.

Ross (2013) and Penfold (2011) identify numerous attitudes common in turnaround pastors. A turnaround pastor is focused, determined, outgoing, energetic, and an innovative team builder with excellent communication skills (Penfold, 2011). Turnaround pastors successfully leverage these attitudes to direct transformational change initiatives in entrenched religious cultures. Ross (2013) offers twelve attitudes of a turnaround pastor. Three attitudes of note include a leader's ability to manage emotional pain, a willingness to endure inevitable personal clashes arising from cultural change, and commitment to stay between five and twelve years (Ross, 2013).

Revitalizing a dying church requires immense and sometimes painful change. "Turnaround is fairly rare, and that's probably because it is often costly" (Stroh, 2014, p. 138). Nevertheless, those pastors committed to turnaround help members see the necessity of change (Martin, 2015). Plateauing and declining churches often turn inward thinking that by doing so they will survive. Lamb (2016) challenges turnaround pastors to help their congregations see the reality of their current situation then move the church toward "patience, positivity, and passion" (p. 157). The inwardly focused church must be challenged to turn their eyes and hearts out to the community they are called to serve (Lamb, 2016; Stroh, 2014). Doing so requires change. The turnaround pastor is willing to "pay the price to lead change" (Penfold, 2011, p. 175). A transformational leadership style is vital to leading an organization through change (Michaelis, Stegmaier, & Sonntag, 2008). In this case, the organization is the local church desiring to move from stagnation to vitality.

Turnaround pastors lead by effectively communicating a God-given vision to followers (Lamb, 2016; Martin, 2015; Page, 2008; Penfold, 2011). Kouzes and Posner (2017) describe vision as "projections of one's fundamental beliefs and assumptions about human nature,

technology, economics, science, politics, art, ethics, and the like" (p. 98). Turnaround pastors genuinely believe that a dying church can live. They act on those beliefs by tenaciously painting the picture of a better future for a church that is, for the moment, struggling to stay open for one more Sunday. Vision is key to motivating followers toward greater creativity, collaboration, and higher levels of performance (Bass, 1985; Hughes, 2014; Scuderi, 2010). Turnaround pastors consistently cast a vision that compels people to act and challenges followers to deeper levels of organizational commitment (Penn, 2011).

A behavior overwhelmingly portrayed in the literature is the image of a pastor who genuinely loves people (Crandall, 1995; Rainer & Lawless, 2003). Crandall (1995) asked members of small congregations this question, "What are your pastor's three greatest assets and strengths in ministry" (p. 31)? The following five results occurred: loving people, people skills, preaching, visionary motivator, and personal faith and love for God (Crandall, 1995, p. 31). Love, for the turnaround pastor, is not viewed as some abstract or vague concept. For turnaround pastors, love is demonstrated in concrete action meant to build up their followers (see Ephesians 4:11–12). The literature lists a multitude of practical ways turnaround pastors build people up: discovery and development of gifts that leads to empowering followers to passionately use their gifts in shared ministry (Nixon, 2004; Penfold, 2011; Rainer & Lawless, 2003; Stroh, 2014), being authentic and leading by example (Crandall, 1995; Nixon, 2004; Rainer, 2001), keeping an elevated level of faith and optimism (Frazee, 1995; Mays, 2011; Rainer, 2001), and modeling a life of deep spiritual discipline (Crandall, 1995; Rainer, 2001). The literature also describes the turnaround pastor as one who is willing to confront others in love (Lamb 2016; Penfold, 2011; Wood, 2001). Jesus was asked, "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law" (Matthew 22:36 NIV). His answer was twofold: love God, and love people (Matthew 22:37–40).

Turnaround pastors, through the enablement of the Holy Spirit, typify a life committed to these two commands so that followers are inspired to do the same.

Pastors recognize the invaluable role of lay leaders in successfully turning around a dying church. Revitalizing a rural church requires a cooperative and interactive relationship between pastors and lay leaders. The literature portrays turnaround pastors as having similar qualities of transformational leaders. Pastors who adopt a transformational leadership style produce a wide-range of positive follower effects.

Bass and Avolio (1994) assert transformational leaders consistently produce four follower effects: trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect. Conger, Rabindra, Kanungo, and Menon (2000) state that charismatic or transformational leadership has likely follower effects. They hypothesized that when followers perceived managers as transformational leader's, changes would occur in follower "attitudes, values, and behaviors" (Conger, et, al., 2000). Consequently, followers work to meet the expectations the leader has established usually accomplishing more than initially expected; and followers view their contribution toward accomplishing a task more positively (Conger, et al., 2000). Podsakof, et al. (1990) explained that the follower effects of trust in, and satisfaction with, a transformational leader are the mediating factors for organizational citizenship behaviors and help to leadership fatigue.

Other research has linked transformational leadership behavior to increased organizational innovation because of an increased commitment to change by followers (Bjorn, Stegmaier, & Sonntag, 2010). An assumption by the researcher is that turnaround pastors have a transformational style and produce positive follower effects of reverence, trust, and satisfaction with the leader in rural turnaround congregations. These follower effects result in lay leaders forming a unique group identity resulting in higher performance than initially expected.

Much of the literature speaks of the necessity of good relations between pastor and lay leaders. "With growth and changes in society, the pastor is unable to continue the mission set by Jesus without help from trained laity" (McEachin, 2011, p. 71C). Penfold (2011) insists that even the most capable pastor cannot produce church growth alone. He or she must have the help of a capable and willing laity (Penfold, 2011). Martin (2015) contends a turnaround pastor should cast clear vision in a manner that lay leaders can easily understand. More importantly, the turnaround pastor must include a vision that clearly calls laity to ministry involvement. If pastors mean to mobilize the church for God's mission effectively, they must elevate the role of lay leaders in the church (Newton, 2013; Mays, 2011; Scuderi, 2010; Shanlian, 2013; Sloan, 2001). Hunt (2016) declares the most significant challenge facing churches is a lack of trained lay leaders. Daniels (2012) insists that laity must be equipped and inspired to co-labor with pastors in significant ministry aspects of the local church.

A preponderance of literature speaks to the necessity of strong lay leadership and the need for pastors to develop lay leaders. There is also a host of general ideas about the role of lay leaders in church turnaround. However, much of the literature lacks significant identification of what character qualities define a strong lay leader and what pastors should look for in them.

Rural church leadership. This hermeneutic phenomenological study focuses on rural churches that have plateaued or declined and now need intervention by effective pastoral and lay leaders to turnaround. Church turnaround is rare (Martin, 2015; McEachin, 2011; Stroh, 2014) and a pastor usually leads only one turnaround in his or her career (Martin, 2015). Nevertheless, some pastors can and do lead plateauing or declining rural churches to turnaround. These pastors recognize that leading the rural church is different from leading a non-rural church.

Rural churches do not function the same as urban or suburban churches, so they must be led differently. McIntosh (1999) insists that specific leadership styles and organizational structures are best suited to certain size churches. Rural churches, in the main, are small. Fact 2000 (Dudley & Roozen, 2001) reports the average size of rural liberal, moderate, and evangelical congregations are smaller than their non-rural counterparts. The study also notes that 52% of churches in the United States are situated in small-town or rural settings (Dudley & Roozen, 2001). McIntosh (1999) defines the small church as being between fifteen and two-hundred attendees.

Pastors in the rural setting do not place the same emphasis on some aspects of leadership than their non-rural counterparts. Carney (2010) highlights the priority differences between rural and non-rural pastoral activity. In an online survey, pastors were asked to "identify the essential tasks of pastoral leadership" (Carney, 2010). Not surprisingly, rural and non-rural pastors identified the same five essential pastoral tasks: "visionary leadership, dynamic preaching, multi-generational discipleship, biblical knowledge, and culturally relevant outreach" (Carney, 2010, p. 100). The difference between rural and non-rural pastoral leadership lies not in the tasks, but in the priority placed on these tasks. Table 1 shows the differences between the rural and non-rural ranking of essential pastoral tasks (Carney, 2010, p. 99).

Table 1

Ranking of Essential Pastoral Tasks of Rural and Non-Rural Pastors

Pastoral Task	Rural Ranking	Non-Rural Ranking
Dynamic preaching	1	3
Visionary leadership	2	1
Biblical Knowledge	3	4
Multi-Generational discipleship	4	2
Culturally relevant outreach	5	5

Sprayberry's (2010) study of small and plateaued churches initially sought to develop a strategic plan for turnaround (abstract). His research led him to believe that small rural congregations must be led relationally instead of "rationally structured, task driven, goal-oriented organization[s]" (Sprayberry, 2010, abstract). Consequently, Sprayberry abandoned the idea of constructing strategic plans for a turnaround. Instead, he began investigating the relational nature of rural church leadership to understand better how it impacts revitalization. The rural pastor's priority is building relationships and each task is ranked according to how it helps fulfill that priority.

How pastors and lay leaders go about turnaround is unique to the context, but some pastoral leadership qualities are the same. Both Carney (2010) and Sprayberry (2010) identify two essential leadership characteristics required of rural pastors leading turnaround: (a) passionate spiritual care and, (b) commitment to long-tenured pastoral ministry. These leadership essentials do not imply that non-rural pastors should not possess similar traits, quite the contrary. Leadership styles, however, are necessarily influenced by context; and context (e.g., rural) sets the pastors leadership priority. Metaxas and Guthrie (2017) relate the experience of a rural pastor assigned to a 12-member congregation in Iowa. The young pastor stated,

> I could put up office hours all day long in rural America, and nobody's coming. But if I sit on the combine with them, or go to the coffee shop, or watch a volleyball game with them - they don't want me to use the word 'counseling,' but we talk through things. (para. 8).

When this young pastor adapted his leadership style to fit the context of the rural United States the church moved from 12 members to 30 (Mataxes & Guthrie, 2017). Pastors desiring to

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effectively lead the rural church must adapt their leadership style to their context including understanding the nature of power and control structures.

Rural churches not only differ in culture and organization but also in structures of power and control. In other words, how things get done in the small rural church is different than in larger non-rural churches. The small church relies heavily on volunteers instead of paid staff to lead key initiatives and programs of the church. Pastors cannot lead churches to turnaround alone. They need strong lay leaders to come alongside them to succeed. Rural pastors must identify and effectively utilize these lay leaders to bring about a turnaround in their church. Hagiya (2011) reports 70% of highly effective pastors believe the congregation and its leadership had a "fundamental role" in their success (p. 138). Hagiya (2011) also reports that turnaround leaders insist the relationship between themselves and laity is significantly important to their success as a pastoral leader. Costner's (2017) study compared lay leadership in turnaround and non-turnaround churches. His research defined what he calls a "high-capacity" lay leader in a turnaround church. These leaders possess four qualities that lay leaders in non-turnaround churches do not possess. "High-capacity" (Costner, 2017) lay leaders:

1. "[Understand] their purpose and God's call on their life," (p. 133)

2. "[have] a growth mindset," (p. 133)

3. "[have] a servant's heart," (p. 134)

4. "[have] a desire to multiply and grow the body of Christ." (p. 134)

Review of Methodological Issues

Rural churches are feeling the impact of urbanization and finding it difficult to sustain their God-given mission. "Many of the 7,000 churches that close each year in America are in rural settings. Thousands more are either in decline or struggling to survive" (Russell, 2014, p.

36). To reverse the trend toward death, rural churches require "intentional intervention and transformational change" (Russell, 2014, p. 36). Pastors who effectively lead churches to turnaround exhibit a transformational leadership style (Carter, 2009; Christopher, 2014; Shanlian, 2013). Shanlian (2013) emphasizes a correlative relationship between transformational leaders and church revitalization. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach is employed to understand the experiences of church leaders who intervened and brought about transformational change in their dying rural church. The literature points to the extensive use of artifacts, interviews, and observations that, when analyzed, produce phenomenological insight into the character and perception of leadership in churches (Aspers, 2009; Faklaris, 2013; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Groenwald, 2004; Laverty, 2003; Kafle, 2011; Simon, 2011).

Interviews and focus groups feature prominently in the research of pastoral leadership and its effects on followers (Boyd, 2011; Christopherson, 2014; Costner, 2017; Daniels 2012; Hagiya, 2011; Hunt, 2016; Lamb, 2016; Martin, 2011; Mays, 2011; McEachin, 2011; Myatt, 2017; Penn, 2011). Creswell (2014) suggests focus groups can be conducted in many ways to reach the research goal. Groups can vary in size and interviews can be structured or unstructured. Martin (2011) led focus groups among pastors and leaders of five Methodist congregations in West Ohio. He was keen to find common patterns among turnaround churches (Martin, 2011). The interviews were videoed, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes. Daniels (2012) and Hunt (2016) use pre and post questionnaires in sequential mixed methods studies to explore the attitudes of church members about change. Daniels (2012) used pre and post surveys to measure the attitudinal change in a deteriorating African-American congregation. Participants were given a pre and post workshop questionnaire to survey their attitudes regarding "church appearance, church culture, worship, ministry opportunities, and technology" (Daniels,

2012, p. 94). Hunt's (2012) research centered upon a Native American congregation in rural North Carolina.

Artifacts such as denominational data, church business meeting notes, church newsletters, sermons, doctrinal and vision statements, and more provide rich qualitative insight. Mays (2011) imagined that rural schools, like rural churches, could benefit from a transformational leader. He believed that principles applied to rural church revitalization would also apply to rural school revitalization. He collected meeting minutes, church publications, mission statements, sermons, and other relevant material (Mays, 2011). These artifacts were created prior to the study and gave the researcher insight into the phenomenon independent of the influences of a formal study. Hagiya (2011) gathered books and literature on church growth and evangelism that ministers might have in their libraries.

Mays (2011) use of surveys among congregational members was not well received thus hindering his work. Pastors were asked to provide other persons who might participate in the study though they did not initially meet the sample criteria. To verify his work, Mays (2011) gathered other data from a variety of church artifacts (e.g., newsletters, business meeting notes). Penfold (2011) distributed short surveys to pastors and lay leaders for comparative purposes. He wanted to "test the pastor's perception of himself with the perception of his lay leaders" (Penfold, 2011, p. 119). Using a "Ministry Focus Survey," Keeley (2012) measured participant churches in three areas: congregational focus, location on church life cycle, and biographical data. Keeley (2012) sought to discover if coaching could help churches move from an inward to an outward focus.

Case study methodology is also used to explore bounded systems and in combination with the above methods (Cushman, 1978; Martin, 2015; McEachin, 2011; Penn, 2011; Penfold,

2011). A "bounded system" is like placing a fence around a group, setting, time, program, or phenomenon for in-depth study. The "bounded system" allows the researcher to narrow his or her research focus. "Case study is a qualitative methodological tool used to explore in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell, 2014, p. 241). Pastors and churches in North Carolina African-American rural congregations are the subjects of McEachin's (2011) work. A single church experiencing a turnaround in South Carolina is studied (Shanlian, 2017). Evangelical pastors in the Rocky Mountain States are analyzed to identify characteristics of turnaround pastors (Penfold, 2011). Myatt (2017) considers how to change church member perceptions of pastoral leadership in a Native American church in rural Oklahoma. The goal of this project is to understand the nature of relationships between pastors and lay leaders in multiple churches. A case study approach would limit the scope of the research and its goal to understand the experiences of church leaders revitalizing a rural church.

Much of the literature regarding leadership qualities and characteristics of pastors and lay leaders employed a phenomenological approach. Martin (2011) looks at multiple Methodist congregations in Western Ohio to find typical traits of a turnaround in those churches. Through a series of interviews with small declining churches, Lamb (2016) sought to find a "prescription" for turnaround (p. 4). Christopherson (2014) used a phenomenological approach to understand the self-perception of pastors whose churches are in decline. Hagiya (2011) qualitatively assessed the leadership qualities of successful pastors in a single denomination. Phenomenological research is appropriate to understand how the relationship between pastors and lay leaders leads to church turnaround.

Synthesis of Past Research Findings

The story of the United States resounds with images and actions of the rural church. In recent times, however, the demographic shift from rural areas to urban centers and clusters has negatively impacted rural churches. The out-migration of rural peoples happens for a multitude of reasons. Johnson (2006) reports adults under the age of 20 regularly leave their rural environs for better educational or economic opportunities. This out-migration of young adults has led to declining birthrates only exacerbating the depopulation of rural areas in the United States. Once the center of rural social life, rural churches are now plateauing and declining. While some rural churches have reached the end of their life, many others are candidates for revitalization or turnaround. Rejuvenating a declining church involves a cooperative relationship between pastor and lay leaders.

The literature suggests that leaders who choose a transformational leadership style are more effective than those who choose another style. Transformational leaders focus on casting a vision and their follower's participation in it (Hughes, 2014; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). A transformational leader is one who acts in such a way to influence followers to a higher level of commitment and performance. He or she empowers followers to find innovative solutions and reach shared goals creatively. The transformational leader promotes innovation. In a study of Methodist pastors, transformational leadership positively correlates with church growth (Bass, 1990). Carter (2009) posits that a transformational leadership style is invaluable to pastoral effectiveness. Pastors who choose to lead a church turnaround can benefit from adopting a transformational leadership style. Leadership of any kind requires the dyadic relationship of leader and follower. In this phenomenological study, that dyadic relationship is between pastors

and lay leaders who have successfully turned around a plateaued or declining church. As such, it is necessary to explore the role of a lay leaders in church turnaround.

Martin (2015) describes the relationship between pastor and lay leaders in church turnaround as "synergistic" (abstract). The literature demonstrates the vital role lay leaders play in revitalization. Pastors know the biblical mandate to equip strong lay leadership (Barna, 1993; Daniels, 2012; Ephesians 4:11–12) to make revitalization possible. First, pastors must lift the role of lay leaders within the church and involve them in significant ministry tasks and decision making. However, the literature lacks specificity in outlining the characteristics and qualities of lay leaders. Costner (2017) identifies four qualities of "high-capacity lay leaders." However, the literature attempting to understand the relationship dynamics between turnaround pastors and lay leaders is virtually non-existent. Sloan (2001) studied small turnaround Nazarene churches in Central Florida. When pastors were asked to identify critical factors in their church turnaround, the role of lay leaders did not come up (Sloan, 2001). However, these same pastors did mention that ministries carried out for the church by lay leaders as important (Sloan, 2001). The seeming contradiction might be indicative of pastoral leadership that focuses heavily on tasks lay leaders perform and not their relationship with those lay leaders.

Critique of Previous Research

The review revealed significant gaps in the literature about church revitalization and turnaround. While there is no lack of research investigating the nature and character of church turnaround, little research has occurred focusing on church turnaround in the rural context. My literature review research revealed four dissertations dealing specifically with rural church revitalization or turnaround (Daniels, 2012; Lamb, 2016; Russell, 2014; Sprayberry, 2010). The literature abounds with studies about the leadership characteristics of turnaround pastors but do

not specifically reference the rural turnaround pastor. Only Costner (2017) discussed the characteristics of lay leaders in turnaround churches but not in a rural setting. McEachin (2011) and Penfold (2011) mention the importance of lay leaders in church turnaround but focus primarily on the pastor's success. Other scholars insist the role of lay leaders should be elevated in importance (Newton, 2013; Mays, 2011; Scuderi, 2010; Shanlian, 2013; Sloan, 2001). However, these studies focus primarily on the leadership qualities of pastors not on role of lay leaders in the turnaround. Furthermore, research examining the effects of turnaround pastors on lay leaders and how that relationship affects a congregation's ability to achieve turnaround are scarce in the literature.

This study seeks to close the literature gap by investigating the phenomenon of rural church turnaround through the stories of rural pastors and lay leaders. By giving a voice to pastors and lay leaders of rural Assembly of God churches, the researcher will contribute significantly to church revitalization literature. Rural churches in the United States are rapidly dying (Russell, 2014). However, through strong pastoral and lay leadership, some of those churches are experiencing new life (Russell, 2014). Exploration of the lived experiences of leaders in rural churches supplement the existing literature but add depth of knowledge to the critical issue of church revitalization.

Utilizing the literature, the researcher developed conceptual framework using transformational leadership theory, church growth and decline data, rural context data, and church turnaround data, as lenses to form a hermeneutic through which the researcher approaches the study of church turnaround. There is enough reason for thinking that an investigation examining the relationship between pastors and lay leaders involved in revitalizing a plateauing or declining church may yield significant findings. I can, therefore, claim that the

literature review has provided solid support for pursuing a research project to test the following research question: What are the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of plateauing or declining churches in rural areas of the United States who have led their churches to turnaround?

Chapter 2 Summary

The four interpretive lenses of the conceptual framework provide a backdrop for the researcher to explore the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders who led their plateauing or declining churches to a turnaround. The researcher focused on a broad understanding of the literature that describes the quantitative and qualitative nature of church plateau, decline, and turnaround. The second contextual frame described the qualities of a transformational leader found in the literature. The description of a transformational leader served as the foundation for qualities the literature suggests are present in successful leaders. The next contextual frame focuses on how the characteristics of transformational leaders are present in turnaround pastors. The literature overwhelmingly focuses on the role of these pastors in church revitalization. However, a gap exists in the literature that describes how the relationship between pastors and lay leaders affected church turnaround. A specific focus on understanding the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders in the rural Missouri Assembly of God churches is the subject of the research. Consequently, the fourth frame centered upon defining the rural context. Rural areas, home to nearly half of all churches in the United States, are experiencing depopulation as young adults out-migrate to cities for better educational and economic opportunities. The decline of rural populations in the United States negatively impacts the rural church's ability to sustain its mission. Lastly, the literature was examined to understand the leadership priorities of rural pastors. Rural and non-rural pastors agree on five of the most critical responsibilities of church leadership. However, there is disagreement as to how to prioritize these responsibilities. The

literature suggests that non-rural pastors emphasize accomplishing tasks, while rural pastors

focus on relationships to achieve the organizational vision.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Religious researchers estimate 65% to 80% of all churches in the United States are either plateauing or declining (Clarensau, 2017; Houseal, 2018; Rainer, 2017). As rural populations wane so too does worship attendance in many rural churches ("2012 National Congregations Study", 2012; Russell, 2014). Many rural churches close each year because they fail to sustain their God-given mission (Russell, 2014). Nevertheless, some rural churches experience growth because of strong intentional pastoral and lay leadership intervention. This exemplary church growth occurred within some rural Missouri Assemblies of God churches. The researcher looked at the phenomenon of rural church revitalization through a conceptual framework of four interpretive lenses. The lenses formed a hermeneutic through which the researcher approached the study. Chapter 3 was divided into several sections. These sections provided an overview of the study's purpose, research question, design of the study, participants of the study, data collection methods, identification of attributes, data analysis procedures, limitations of the research design, validation of trustworthiness and credibility, expected findings, and ethical issues.

Purpose of Study

This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches in plateau or decline but then experienced a turnaround. Church turnaround, also known as revitalization or comeback, describes a church plateaued or declined in average worship attendance over an extended period but reversed the trend to experience growth (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Mays, 2011).

Research Question and Design

Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study examined the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. The primary research question is:

RQ$_1$:   What are the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of churches in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches who led their churches to turnaround after experiencing a plateau or decline in attendance?

Phenomenology, at its core, is the study of various first-person lived experiences or *phenomena*. Dilthey (1976) defined *hermeneutics* as, "how human studies are related to the fact of humanity" (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 9). Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to find meaning in a person's everyday ordinary experiences; those pieces of life "tak[en] for granted" (Laverty, 2003). Philosophically, phenomenology seeks to bring together the outer world of environment, culture, and context into the inner world of the human perception of their outer world experiences in order to explicate meaning.

Phenomenology originated from the work of Edmund Husserl (Kafle, 2011; Wilding, 2005). Husserl developed a method of research referred to as transcendental phenomenology. The researcher's goal when utilizing transcendental phenomenology is reduction, also known as bracketing or epoche (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Reduction (bracketing or epoché) is the investigator's attempt to remove her or his prejudices about a phenomenon and arrive at a single pure description of a lived experience (Kafle, 2011). Martin Heidegger a student of Husserl rejected the idea of a researcher's ability to transcend his or her opinion and arrive at a pure description of phenomena (Kafle, 2011; Wilding, 2005). Heidegger posits that the very act of describing the meaning of a lived experience ultimately is itself an act of interpretation.

Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on how groups and individuals ascribe meaning to a lived experience. Phenomenological research rose to prominence in a post-war Europe as researchers began to explore the human experience of war (Groenewald, 2004).

As a research approach, phenomenology seeks to "expose the implicit structure and meaning of […] experiences" to discover, as best one can, "the 'essence of things' that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation" (Lin, 2013, p. 470). The investigator gets to the essence of experience by asking "What is the experience like?" (Van Manen, 1990). The researcher then describes a person's or group's perception of their experience in rich, thick, and sometimes poetic language. It is an attempt to understand and describe in evocative language the thing that makes a thing a thing (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher an interpretive role. Husserl (1859–1938) postulated the researcher should suspend or bracket personal assumptions along with any knowledge they may possess of the lived experience. They must transcend the phenomena to arrive at a description of what Husserl (1858–1938) called *Lebenswelt* or lifeworld (Kafle, 2011; Van Manen, 1990).

Van Manen (1990) asserts "there [is] no such thing as uninterpreted phenomena" (p. 180). Interviewed subjects interpreted their lived experiences giving them meaning. Eatough and Larkin (2008) explains hermeneutic phenomenology as getting to the essence of a phenomenon by looking at the meaning given to it by the individual who experienced it. Individual experiences of a phenomenon are filtered through their personal understanding of the world, cultural context, and knowledge (Eatough & Larkin, 2008). Consequently, the meaning of a phenomenon is individualized even when some group meaning is available. Hermeneutic phenomenology accepts the researcher too has a way of being in the world and unintentionally interjects his or her experiences into the descriptions of phenomena thus interpreting the lived

experiences of others. Van Manen (1990) insists it is impossible for the phenomenological researcher to transcend his or her "understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories" (p. 47). Therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach acknowledged and accounted for my pre-understandings.

Hermeneutic phenomenology pursues an understanding of the meanings ascribed to a phenomenon by a person or group through a reflective-interpretive process (Annells, 1996; Moustakas, 1994). Gadamer (1987) described hermeneutic phenomenology both as a method of textual interpretation and as a way to interpret one's experience when reading a text." According to hermeneutics (from the Greek word 'to *interpret'* or '*to make clear'*) one needs to comprehend the mind-set of a person and language which mediates one's experiences of the world, in order to translate his or her message" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 362). The phenomenological approach delves into the values one possesses and determines the meaning one arrives at in an experience, not just a description of the phenomena. It abstains from transcending or disassociating the researcher from the process of discovery but recognizes a researcher's presence and inquiry into the phenomena causes the interpretation.

Additionally, this method encourages co-operative interchange between the researcher and participant (Eatough & Larkin, 2008: Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). The researcher and participants moved back and forth together from the whole phenomenon to its parts continually in a hermeneutic circle. Kafle (2011) describes the hermeneutic circle as a process of "reading, reflective writing, and interpretation" (p. 192). Eatough and Larkin (2008) view the hermeneutic circle ontologically as how humans related to the world. A person's experience and their being in the world intertwine and are inseparable. The investigator and participant cooperatively engage in dialogue relating to the phenomena. In this way they discover prejudgments which

lead to preunderstandings (Moustakas, 1994). Pietkiewicz & Lewis (2012) describe this process

as a "double hermeneutic" (p. 361). The researcher produces a rich description of themes

elicited from interviews but also interprets those themes personally. However, because the

hermeneutic process is circular, preunderstandings temporarily and constantly reform (Laverty,

2003; Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this co-operative dialogical and reflective process exists to

draw out from an individual the meaning of his or her lived experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology departs from prescribing a set of rules leading to a

generalizable conclusion. Van Manen (1990) warns researchers of extensive challenges in using

this method. Consequently, the investigator remains holistically focused on the phenomena of

study, while also exploring its constituent parts. The research question also remains central to

phenomenological discovery. The investigator gives over to a single-mindedness refusal to settle

for natural conclusions. Van Manen (1990) asserts "hermeneutic phenomenological research

may be seen as a dynamic interplay among six research activities:"

1. turning to a phenomenon, which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;

2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;

3. reflecting on the essential themes, which characterize the phenomenon;

4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;

5. manipulating a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;

6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (Van Manen, 1990,
    pp. 30–31)

Though Van Manen (1990) resists the idea of fixed procedures in phenomenological research,

these activities form an iterative process. Subject and investigator move from the phenomena to

its parts, and back to the whole. Each hermeneutical movement between subject, researcher and

the phenomena provide new phenomenological insight upon which to reflect and extract meaning. Discovery occurs intentionally through interrogation of words spoken by the participant. Exegeting essential meaning from the descriptions of the phenomena exists as the goal. This exegeted meaning becomes the subject of further inquiry and reflection.

The temporal and fluid nature of meaning drawn out of a person's lived experience was, for me, the appeal of hermeneutic phenomenology. Instead of attempting to arrive at a generalizable understanding or description of rural church turnaround, there remained a narrower investigatory purpose to my research. I sought to comprehend the lived experiences and perceptions of rural church pastors and lay leaders as they worked together to revive a stagnate or declining church. While similarities in these experiences existed as a possibility, I fully expected to draw out different meanings of the phenomenon from each data cluster.

Research Population and Sampling Method

The sample population in this study consisted of three homogeneous data clusters. Each cluster contained a pastor and two or more lay leaders from Assemblies of God churches located in a rural area of Missouri. These pastors and lay leaders worked together to bring about church turnaround.

Research population. This study's phenomenological approach examined the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. In the three churches chosen for the study, there were 13 participants. This included 3 male pastors, 4 female lay leaders, and 6 male lay leaders. Participants ranged in age from the late-20s to the mid-80s.Eatough and Larkin (2008) insisted phenomenological research studies should comprise one to 30 participants. Creswell (1998) suggested a sample size of 15 to 20 total participants. Creswell (1998) and Eatough and Larkin (2008) recommended keeping the

research population small but conducting multiple interviews. This study included 13 total participants. The researcher conducted six interviews: three separate interviews with pastors and three separate interviews with lay leader groups ranging in size from two to six. Consequently, six interview transcripts were produced from the study.

Sampling method. A non-probability sampling technique known as purposive sampling was utilized to select primary participants. Instead of randomly choosing participants, the researcher selected participants who offered personal insight into the studied phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Lavrakas, 2008). The literature review contained four phenomenological studies exploring the phenomenon of leading a church to a turnaround (Christopherson, 2014; Hagiya, 2011; Lamb, 2016; Martin, 2011). To identify a representative sample of rural turnaround pastors in Missouri the researcher contacted the Assemblies of God, the Southern Missouri District of the Assemblies of God, the Northern Missouri District of the Assemblies of God, and Convoy of Hope – Rural Compassion. Pastors and lay leaders of churches met the following parameters: they were in a rural area of Missouri, members of the Assembly of God, experienced a decline in Sunday worship attendance, and subsequently sustained growth in Sunday worship attendance.

The research focused on the phenomenon of declining rural churches that experienced subsequent growth. Consequently, pastors and lay leaders selected for the study demonstrated their decline and subsequent growth qualitatively or quantitively. Quantitatively, churches of any size with a 2.5% reduction in attendance over a five-year period is declining (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015, Penfold, 2011; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007). Conversely, literature shows a congregation of any size with a 2.5% increase in attendance over a five-year period is considered a turnaround church (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015, Penfold, 2011; Stetzer & Dodson, 2007).

Qualitatively, participants intuitively described decline with terms like, "lost momentum" (Mays, 2011) or "survival" (Ross, 2013). These terms described the sense of loss they felt in the membership and mission of their congregation. Conversely, participants described their perceptions of growth using descriptive language like revival, the house was full, we needed more chairs, more ministry took place, the finances improved, and more.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The researcher conducted semistructured and open-ended interviews with pastors and lay leaders (see Appendix A). I developed interview questions based on the review of literature, extensive personal experience of being rural Assembly of God turnaround pastor, five years' experience coaching pastors in the area of church health, and 25 years of pastoral ministry in a variety of contexts. A pilot test was conducted and questions were revised for clarity and effectiveness. Semistructured interviews were performed in person at a location chosen by the participants. Face-to-face interviews were electronically recorded using a handheld digital recorder. All interviews were transcribed by hand or by using a transcription service for coding purposes. Transcripts were analyzed using the hermeneutic method of "reading, reflective writing, and interpretation" (Kafle, 2011). Artifacts voluntarily given to the researcher by participants were also analyzed using the hermeneutic method. The goal of the interview was to gather as much information possible regarding the experiences of pastors and lay leaders significantly involved in church turnaround.

Pastors were interviewed alone and lay leaders were interviewed in groups without the pastor present. Participating pastors were asked to select those lay leaders believed to have significantly contributed to the church turnaround. To create an open and honest interview environment, the researcher believed it necessary to conduct interviews with pastors and lay

leaders separately. This allowed all parties concerned freedom to voice their experiences as they saw fit. The researcher conducted separate interviews to compare how lived experiences were remembered. Separate interviews also minimized the possibility of pastoral influence on how lay leaders described the leadership of their pastor. Follow-up interviews were not necessary.

Identification of Attributes

The primary attribute of this study was the relationship between pastors and lay leaders in rural turnaround churches. Martin (2015) emphatically asserts the essentiality of cooperation between pastoral leadership and lay leaders. Current literature often overlooked the role of lay leadership in the revitalization of plateauing or declining churches. Consequently, the relationship between pastor and lay leader and its effect on church turnaround went previously unexplored. Investigating how pastors and effective lay leaders worked together provided crucial phenomenological insight into how churches experienced revitalization within the rural context.

The second attribute focused on the context in which turnaround occurred. Specifically, the research explored rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. Furthermore, the study sought to understand how the cultural and geographical setting of the rural United States shaped the vision for these pastors and lay leaders. Several sociological and economic factors led to population decline in rural areas. The changing face of the rural United States forced change upon rural churches. A loss of human and social services, lack of quality educational opportunities, and a multitude of economic factors led to rural depopulation. This loss of population, especially among young adults, depleted churches of future attendees to support the church's mission. Understanding how rural turnaround churches faced these demographic and social changes was vital to the Christian church.

Data Analysis Procedures

To address the primary research, question the researcher collected data from three sources. First, selected participants were interviewed using a semistructured open-ended interview (see Appendix A). Second, participants were asked to voluntarily provide physical artifacts for analysis pertaining to their experience. Third, the researcher provided participants with a written phenomenological description based on their unique turnaround experiences for review and correction.

Semistructured interview analysis protocol. After completing all interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews using a transcription service for analysis. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) recommended the phenomenological data be analyzed in a three-step process. First, all data was read multiple times, notes were made, and initial codes established. Second, the researcher analyzed the notes and initial codes to "transform [them] into emerging themes" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 366; Van Manen, 1990). Finally, emerging themes were clustered or placed into code families, "according to conceptual similarities and providing each cluster with a descriptive label" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 367). The process inductively moved from collected data, to researchers notes and coding of collected data, and finally to the identification of relationships between code families or clusters. Analyzing collected data in this manner permitted the researcher to move from the whole phenomenon, to the parts, and back again in the hermeneutic circle. With each orbit around the hermeneutical circle, the researcher was centrifugally drawn deeper into the conversation within the text until a rich description of the phenomenon emerged.

Artifacts. Some participants brought artifacts representing their turnaround experience. Merriam (2016) states, "Artifacts are usually three-dimensional physical 'things' or objects in the

environment that represent some form of communication that is meaningful to the participants and/or the setting" (p. 162). Artifacts represented common forms of church communication to church members. The artifacts included board meeting notes, magazine articles, newspaper clippings, mission and vision statements, and staff meeting notes.

The researcher's use of these artifacts provided understanding of the pre-turnaround organizational and cultural environment. These artifacts gave textual clues into how church leaders communicated various initiatives meant to bring about revitalization, equip members for ministry, cast vision for turnaround, view their history, and more. Data analysis of artifacts followed the same method used to analyze interview transcripts (Merriam, 2016).

Member checking. After completion of the interview and artifact analysis the researcher compiled a document containing the phenomenological description of each participating church for member checking. Member checking helped to ensure the trustworthiness, validity and reliability of the qualitative research conducted. This was accomplished by asking participants to check the researcher's findings for accuracy and clarity (Birt, et al., 2016). Member checking also gave participants an opportunity to contribute further insight into their experience as they read and reflected on the description of the church revitalization (Kafle, 2011).

Data storage and destruction. All records were kept confidential. Any published report arising from this study excludes personal information making it possible to identify participants. Only the researcher possesses access to securely stored records. All hard copy data collected was stored in a locked cabinet located in the researcher's office. Electronic recordings were destroyed immediately after transcription. Destruction of hard copy data will occur after three years.

Limitations of the Research Design

This hermeneutic phenomenological study focused on rural churches in the state of Missouri. The literature demonstrated a difference in leadership of rural churches compared to their non-rural counterparts (Carney, 2010; Hagiya, 2011; Sprayberry, 2010). Consequently, how these churches went about the process of turnaround was different. Second, utilizing only rural churches with plateau or decline in church attendance, but followed with subsequent growth is a delimiting factor. Church turnaround of any kind is rare, and most pastors lead only one church to turnaround (Martin, 2015; McEachin, 2011; Stroh, 2014). Turnaround rural churches were chosen because they represented almost half of the Christian churches in the United States (Dudley & Roozen, 2001) and 70% of Assembly of God churches (S. Doty, personal communication, July 27, 2018). A further limitation arises because pastors selected the lay leaders who participated. It was possible some pastors chose lay leaders who portrayed them in the best possible light. The researcher requested only lay leaders significantly involved in the turnaround was selected by pastors.

Validation

Credibility and dependability. Hermeneutic phenomenology did not employ phenomenological reduction (Heideger, Kafle, 2011; Van Manen, 1990). Instead, it accepted the researcher's inability to transcend above his opinion and to arrive at a pure description of the phenomenon. It also recognized the researcher served as an interpreter of the phenomena, through his presence and by the act of writing. The researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and interpretation. While the research design provided a level of credibility through data saturation, other external measures were necessary. Therefore, to ensure

trustworthiness and credibility, the following external quality measures were employed: debriefing, member checking, and a statement of pre-understanding.

Debriefing. Utilizing debriefing added credibility to the findings of this study. Creswell (1998) describes *debriefing* as a human process between the researcher and a peer. The peer played the part of a "devil's advocate" who asked questions concerning the researchers "methods, meanings, and interpretations" (Creswell, 1998, p. 251). The chosen peer and the researcher both kept separately written records of each debriefing session for the sake of accountability (Creswell, 1998). The researcher identified a colleague who possessed a terminal degree and whose research was qualitative in its scope to examine the methods, processes, interpretation of data, and findings.

The colleague and I corresponded by email on January 9, 2019, to discuss my project and to ask for his involvement in debriefing. A de-identified copy of my research proposal was sent to the colleague on January 18, 2019 to help him familiarize himself with my methodological approach. Between January 8 and January 24, 2019, we exchanged eleven emails that focused on methodological questions concerning my choice to interview lay leaders in groups and separate from the pastor. On January 28, 2019, we met via a web-conferencing tool to discuss his thoughts about the project. The colleague made numerous recommendations concerning structural changes to the phenomenological description to ensure the participants "voice" did not get lost. He further questioned areas of the phenomenological description that were unclear to the reader. The colleague and I discussed re-writing specific areas of the project to define religious language used that I assumed people outside of the Assembly of God or the church would understand. He also pointed out multiple uses of leadership language used by participants and me requiring clarification and citation.

Member checking. Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology meant instituting a process of reading, re-reading, and interpreting. Data bias was possible because of the researcher's pre-understandings about the rural church and turnaround. Findings were shared with participants for feedback. Phenomenological descriptions were sent electronically to the participating pastor. The pastor and lay leaders checked the document for accuracy. Changes were made by participants specifically related to the timing of events in the history of the church and the order of numerous pastoral transitions. Additional changes were made to the researchers use of descriptive language participants did not believe reflected their intent when sharing the experience. The process of member checking ensured credibility and dependability of the preliminary analysis. A two-fold purpose was accomplished by sharing this with participants. First it ensured the researcher's analysis resonated with the participant's perceptions. Secondly it allowed for the potential to see if new themes for analysis emerged. This procedure involved the participants in the hermeneutic circle of reading, reflective writing, and interpreting (Kafle, 2011).

Statement of pre-understanding. Creswell (1998) lists the *clarifying of researcher bias* as a validation strategy used in qualitative research. The goal of this strategy was to, as clearly as possible, delineate the "researcher['s] comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study" (Creswell, 1998, p. 251). A statement of pre-understanding by the researcher permitted the reader to know how those influences impacted the interpretation of data. Reflection on the researcher's lived experience as a rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround pastor was an important starting point in this study. Van Manen (2014) suggests prior understandings and assumptions must be

returned to during data analysis to produce trustworthiness. Therefore, the researcher offered his own pre-understandings and assumptions about the phenomenon of rural church turnaround.

Expected Findings

The researcher expected to find each participating church expressing a unique turnaround experience. Though the rural location of all churches were different, dissimilar cultural contexts existed. Church leaders also diverged in similar lived experiences from other study members. Every village and small town in the United States and Missouri interacted differently with the world around them. Churches located within a village or small town also parallel those cultural differences. Church leaders recognized their need for turnaround and led in relevant ways for them and the congregation.

The study expected to find differences existed in the perception of pastors and lay leaders turnaround experiences. Pastoral ministry is, for the most part, a public calling. Pastors are responsible for casting vision for change and being its public face. Successful change is credited to the work of the congregation while failed changes becomes the fault of the pastor. Lay leaders, though active in identifying and formulating a strategy for change, do not feel the public pressure the pastor does. This was expected to cause some relational tension between pastor and lay leaders. How pastors and lay leaders managed these tensions revealed how they made and carried out decisions, how they dealt with failure, and how they communicated the change to the congregation. Lastly, the expectation remained for pastors and lay leaders to offer distinctly different cause(s) of plateau or decline in their churches.

The study also expected to find similarities existing in the perception of pastors' and lay leaders' turnaround experiences. First, each church became cognizant of decline or plateau and decided to act. Second, each church took some time to assess the cost of leading turnaround.

Third, these churches most likely experienced resistance from some existing leaders and church members who refused to admit the church is in trouble. Fourth, most churches underwent significant lay leadership turnover before making any meaningful change leading to turnaround. Fifth, most churches experienced a loss of members leading to financial difficulties while implementing cultural changes. Six, a risk-taking culture developed in participating churches as they experimented with new outreach efforts, worship styles, polity, and leadership development. Last, the participating churches experienced slow but noticeable demographic change within the congregation (e.g., the median age of attendees).

Ethical Issues

Studies involving human subjects required the researcher to prevent harm, protect privacy, and provide informed consent to study participants. As such, the researcher submitted his research proposal for approval to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Concordia University–Portland. The initial proposal was approved contingent on specific changes to the informed consent. The researcher made the changes to the informed consent document and resubmitted for approval. The IRB approved the revised consent form and the researcher began actively recruiting participants. The following paragraphs served to uncover potential ethical issues and provide procedures to reduce risk to involved parties. The role of the researcher and informed consent was also discussed.

Role of the researcher: Statement of pre-understanding. Over the last 25 years, I served in local church leadership capacities within various denominations. I started new congregations in the United States and the Republic of South Africa. Currently, I lead the revitalization of a small rural church in Western Missouri. The researcher's involvement in rural

church revitalization causes bias because of the direct involvement with the phenomena of a turnaround.

Since 2013 I have led a rural Missouri Assembly of God church to a turnaround. My experiences as a turnaround pastor in rural Missouri Assembly of God church influenced my choice of hermeneutic phenomenological approach as a research method instead of transcendental. The researcher refrained from attempting to bracket or suspend personal prejudices about the phenomena of church turnaround. Laverty (2003) writes, "the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to interpretive process" (p. 28). Transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology demand researchers identify biases, but the goals are different. Transcendental phenomenology seeks to set those biases aside while hermeneutics uses identified biases as an essential interpretive tool (Laverty, 2003).

I am personally aware of the challenges presented to leaders who endeavor to lead a church body from death to life. First is the cultural challenge. Congregations experiencing decline tend to do so because they shifted from an evangelistic to a maintenance or survival mindset. Moving a congregation toward an outward focused paradigm was difficult and presented lots of opportunity for pain and joy. Pain watching people leave the congregation due to misunderstanding. Pain listening to accusations of authoritarianism, disrespect, compromise, and even heresy. Pain in managing division in the church body and a general disdain for those outside the body of Christ. Joy as new leaders emerged, old leaders caught the new vision, new believers began to serve the local church, and unity overtaking division. My experience of walking with people through the cultural shift from survival to revival often felt like a season of being slapped in the face while being told: "I love you!" Thankfully, the church body is now at a

healthy place focusing growth instead of dysfunctional personal agendas and political maneuvering. All these experiences inform my interpretation and analysis of the data gathered in this phenomenological research. Taking responsibility for the biases my experiences bring to the study and honestly conveying those biases reveals the researcher's own influences in collecting and interpreting the phenomenological data.

Ethical issues. Phenomenological interviews naturally create a potential privacy issue. The research design called for a series of interviews with the pastor and lay leaders to explore the phenomena of church turnaround. Lay leaders were selected by their pastor based on significant involvement in their church's turnaround experience and were interviewed as a group. To protect the testimony of their church and because of mutual respect and love for each other, both pastors and lay leaders often chose their words carefully. To create an atmosphere of openness and honesty among participants interviews were conducted separately. The goal was to elicit candid and frank responses about the participant's church turnaround experiences. A separate interview with the pastor allowed him or her to speak openly about tensions felt while working with lay leaders in a turnaround. Also, pastors were encouraged to feel free to share vulnerabilities with the researcher they felt unable to share with those they led personally. Separating the interviews also restricted the influence pastors possessed on lay leader responses thus reducing the *halo effect*. Lay leaders also were given freedom to express frustrations or tensions possibly perceived by the pastor as a personal assault. A natural guardedness on both parties most certainly existed. Separate interviews helped minimize privacy concerns.

Informed consent. This study included human participants. The researcher took all necessary precautions to inform participants of the study's scope and nature of their involvement. Potential pastors were contacted by phone and the researcher explained the essence of his

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research. Potential pastors were given an opportunity to ask the researcher questions before agreeing to participate. If the pastor chose to participate a PDF copy of the facilities permission form (see Appendix D) was emailed along with a copy of the informed consent. Participating pastors returned the facilities permission form to the researcher prior to the scheduled interviews. Informed consent forms were presented to participants at the interviews and they were given opportunity to ask questions or seek further clarification prior to signing and participating in the interviews. All participants completed an informed consent and returned the form to the researcher (see Appendix B).

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 described the methodological scope chosen by the researcher to explore lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches formerly in plateau or decline but experienced a turnaround. The researcher offered reasons for choosing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to investigating the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural turnaround churches. Chapter 3 described how participants were selected, data collected, and the nature of what it meant to participate in the research. Ethical issues were outlined including ways to minimize risk and to protect participants throughout the entire research process. Finally, Chapter 3 addressed the role of the researcher including biases impacting the interpretation of the data. Therefore, having provided for the protection of participants, defined the population for study, and delineated a comprehensive research methodology and design, I move on to the next phase of the research process and report these findings in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches facing plateau or decline but experienced a turnaround. A turnaround church is defined as one that plateaued or declined in average worship attendance over a period of time but reversed the trend and experienced growth. Churches whose leaders led them through the phenomenon of a turnaround are sometimes called comeback or revitalized churches (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Mays, 2011). This study sought to understand the nature of the turnaround as experienced by pastors and lay leaders in various rural Missouri Assembly of God church settings. The following research question guided this interpretive analysis:

RQ$_1$:   What are the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of churches in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches who have led their churches to turnaround after experiencing a plateau or decline in attendance?

The researcher's position as a rural turnaround pastor offered an additional perspective on interpreting the data and describing participants' lived experiences. The researcher hoped exploration of the phenomenon might empower potential rural pastors and lay leaders to understand the realities of rural church turnaround. Furthermore, the researcher hoped to assist denominations and church networks better prepare pastors and lay leaders of rural churches to lead their churches to turnaround.

Description of the Sample

The researcher collected data from three rural Assembly of God churches in Southern Missouri. Southern Missouri consists of all Missouri counties south of the Missouri River stretching from its eastern to western borders. The literature review enumerated multiple

definitions used by various agencies to define the term "rural." To ensure a large enough pool

from which to recruit potential participants, the researcher, chose the following definition of

rural, "all population[s], housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban

cluster" (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). Churches in this study ranged in population from 200 to 18,000

residents. Participating churches were geographically located hundreds of miles from an urban

center and each qualified as rural in character by the USDA's rural development loan program

granting them eligibility for rural loan programs.

Each participating church experienced a decline in Sunday attendance and each church

also experienced a later increase in Sunday attendance. The researcher used a type of non-

probability sampling known as purposive sampling to choose participants. The researcher met

with Greg Perkins, Church Development Director for the Southern Missouri District of the

Assemblies of God, who identified six churches fitting the study's criteria: located in rural

Missouri; members of the Assemblies of God; experienced a sustained season of plateau or

decline, and then later sustained increase in Sunday attendance. The researcher contacted a total

of five pastors from the churches identified, explained the study and its requirements, and asked

for participation. Three pastors agreed to participate personally and selected key lay leaders

from their congregation whom they believed were vital to the church's turnaround experience.

Table 2 shows the percentage of increase at each participating turnaround church and the number

of years taken to achieve the increase.

Table 2

Percentage of Increase in Sunday Attendance at Participating Rural Assembly of God Churches

Participating Church	Highest Self-Reported Attendance Prior to Decline	Self-Reported Attendance at the Appointment of Turnaround Pastor	Current Self-Reported Attendance at Sunday Worship	Number of Years	% of Increase
Church A	240	30	300	5	900%
Church B	300	30	120	8	300%
Church C	200	40	102	6	155%

Semistructured and face-to-face interviews were conducted to obtain the phenomenological data required to understand the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. Chapter 4 discusses the nature of the study, its design, data, findings, and analysis in the following sections: description of the sample, research methodology and analysis, summary of findings, presentation of the data and results, and Chapter 4 summary.

Research Methodology and Analysis

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches facing plateau or decline but later experienced a turnaround. To determine the lived experiences of participants, semistructured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (see Appendix A), member checking, and debriefing. The research question and conceptual framework guided the development of interview questions.

The conceptual framework and methodology. The conceptual framework of this study provided a hermeneutical lens through which the researcher developed questions for the semistructured interviews. The first lens of the conceptual framework focused widely on the

church's history and possible reasons for plateau, decline, and turnaround. The written questionnaire directed pastors and lay leaders to describe, as best they could, the history of the church. The histories of participating churches spanned multiple decades. The second lens focused on the rural context. The researcher asked pastors and lay leaders to describe the greatest challenges they faced in revitalizing their churches in their context. As participants told their stories, the researcher prompted them to reflect on the impact of their rural setting on those challenges. The first and second lens of the conceptual framework helped develop questions to ascertain the vocational context of these leaders. Participant responses to these questions created data regarding the leadership experience of turnaround pastors. Moreover, lay leader responses to similar questions created data regarding the impact of pastoral leadership on them and the broader congregation.

The third lens of the conceptual framework explored the qualities of turnaround pastors and effects on lay leaders. Participants were asked to describe how decisions were made during the turnaround. Pastoral responses revealed how they went about casting vision for change and gathered support for new initiatives. Lay leader responses showed how they perceived the pastor's leadership of change. These responses created specific data showing about how lay leaders perceived the pastor's leadership style and how the pastor described his own leadership. The fourth lens examined how rural pastors and lay leaders set priorities as they sought to revitalize the church. Participants were asked questions about the criteria they considered when deciding which changes were most important. They were also asked to describe the decision-making process followed when considering change priorities. This data allowed the researcher a glimpse into how pastors and lay leaders worked through challenges together.

To ensure the interview questions were clear and understandable, the researcher conducted a pilot test with his academic supervisor. The supervisor was asked by the researcher to give feedback about the clarity and efficacy of the questions posed in the interview guide and provided corrective feedback regarding the ordering of questions and reframing questions for more open-ended responses from participants. The researcher revised the interview guide. After reviewing and revising the interview guide, the researcher interviewed three turnaround pastors and 10 key lay leaders.

Interview and analysis process. Interviews with pastors occurred separately from lay leaders to ensure all parties felt free to speak. Conducting pastoral and lay leader interviews separately helped to create an atmosphere of open and honest conversation. Separate interviews made it possible for pastors and lay leaders to convey their turnaround experiences without undue influence or pressure from the other party. The researcher also chose to conduct separate interviews to compare how the different parties remembered their turnaround experience. The comparison helped form a more detailed and rich description of the phenomenon.

All interviews took place at the participating church's building in a private room pre-selected by the pastor. Participants were made aware interviews were digitally recorded with a microphone and a computer. Each participant agreed to the recording verbally and by signing the informed consent. Participants understood the voluntary nature of the study and that they could, at any time and without repercussions, choose to remove themselves from the study or end the interview. The interviews were saved as WAV files on a secure external hard drive and as stored on a flash drive as a backup copy. Both drives were secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's private office. The interviews ranged in duration from 65 to 80 minutes resulting in 117 single-spaced transcribed pages.

Individual transcripts were read and re-read six times and a journal of "things noticed" was kept for each reading. The researcher made written notes in the margins of each transcript. Participants from Church A and Church C provided various artifacts for analyzing. These artifacts included newspaper and magazine articles about the church, church policies, vision and mission statements, church website pages, and church meeting notes. Artifacts were read along with the transcripts and notes kept.

The researcher used a qualitative research software package known as MAXQDA 2018 to develop a code book containing four conceptual themes, 21 codes, and 36 sub-codes. After an initial attempt at coding using the *a priori* codes the process was abandoned. The researcher believed by using *a priori* codes he was superimposing predetermined ideas onto the text and thereby forcing meaning onto the text. The intention of hermeneutic phenomenology was discovery through interrogation of words spoken by participants. The following goal was to exegete essential meaning from the descriptions of the phenomena to become the subject of further inquiry and reflection. Use of *a priori* codes stifled the dialogical process of hermeneutics by prioritizing code categories over the words of the participants whose stories were analyzed.

To stay consistent with the research method of hermeneutical phenomenology, the researcher coded the data using open coding to allow themes, patterns, and keywords to emerge from the text. The researcher continued to use MAXQDA 2018 as a tool to manually code and organize the data, keep memos, and perform lexical searches of transcripts. Manual coding helped form another level of dialogue and reflection between the researcher and participants. Consequently, a richer interpretation of the lived experience occurred.

Phenomenological description and member checking. Once the data was coded, the researcher engaged in the reflective writing process by preparing a phenomenological description of each participating church's turnaround experience. Writing this description allowed the researcher to form a rich and descriptive picture of each church's turnaround experience as understood from the multiple participants' viewpoints. The researcher noted similarities and contrasts between the accounts of events and the perceptions of pastors and lay leaders. Pastors and lay leaders were intentionally asked similar questions in the interviews. The researcher tailored questions to the appropriate audience (pastor or lay leader), but the essence of the questions remained. By reading the distinct responses to these similar questions and comparing the answers, a fuller more interesting description of the turnaround experience emerged. Once written, the researcher sent the phenomenological descriptions electronically to the participants for member checking. Participants noted some corrections to the phenomenological descriptions primarily regarding dates and the order of multiple pastoral transitions.

After correcting the phenomenological descriptions, the researcher re-engaged with the hermeneutical process of "reading, reflective writing, and interpretation" (Kafle, 2011, p. 192). Re-engagement with the member checked accounts of revitalization helped the researcher get to the essence of the lived experiences. As such, the researcher read and re-read the phenomenological descriptions, and coded the data using open coding and entries made into the "things I noticed" journal. A comparison of codes developed in each iteration of the data resulted in a common pattern of a turnaround for each participating church.

Debriefing. To add credibility and trustworthiness to this qualitative study, the researcher utilized debriefing. Creswell (1998) describes *debriefing* as a human process between the researcher and a peer. The peer plays the part of a "devil's advocate" who asks questions

concerning the researcher's "methods, meanings, and interpretations" (Creswell, 1998, p. 251). The researcher engaged the help of a colleague possessing extensive experience in phenomenological research and church turnaround. The researcher presented in writing a de-identified phenomenological description and analysis of data to the colleague for review. After reviewing the supplied document, The colleague and the researcher met via web conference for one-hour. The colleague offered extensive feedback concerning gaps in how the researcher presented some data. He highlighted areas where the researcher lost the voice of the participating persons and how the voice could be restored. The colleague suggested supplying more context to explain religious terminology for others outside of the Assemblies of God or Pentecostal faith tradition. He also pointed out sections of data that needed to stand alone. He expressed that further explanation was needed on how the church moved from focusing on itself to reaching out to its community. Finally, he noted some spelling and grammar issues with the presentation of the data. The suggestions and insights offered about the data offered by a colleague are reflected in the Summary of Findings and Presentation of Data and Results sections in chapter 4.

Summary of Findings

In previous decades each participating church started with the dream of reaching their communities for Christ. All churches experienced a time of extended growth. Pastors baptized converts and educated members in the ways of Christ. These congregations constructed buildings to accommodate the growth. They formed ministries to serve members and reach their rural communities. Over several decades the pastors and members of these churches fervently served Christ and succeeded in building vibrant assemblies. Nevertheless, because of various

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circumstances and challenges, these same churches faltered. Over time, each church plateaued and then declined in Sunday worship attendance, ministry effectiveness, and financial support.

The reasons for decline varied from church to church but exhibited the same result: an ineffective and dying local church body. Attempts to reverse the downward trend included a multitude of pastoral transitions and interventions by denominational leadership. The churches experienced moments of stabilization because of the interventions but eventually found themselves back in decline. Denominational leaders intervened again and appointed new pastors. These newly appointed pastors, along with key lay leaders, successfully navigated a myriad of crises, cultural changes, and leadership challenges bringing their churches back to health and growth.

Presentation of Data and Results

Detailed below are the lived experiences of participating rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. Participants in this study were chosen by the pastor because of their involvement in leading the church to a turnaround. Table 3 shows the participants and their anonymous designations.

Table 3

Table of Participants

Participating Church Designation	Participating Pastor Designation	Participating Lay leader Designation (long)
Church A	Pastor A	Lay leader A1 Lay leader A2

Participating Church Designation	Participating Pastor Designation	Participating Lay leader Designation (long)
		Lay leader A3
		Lay leader A4
		Lay leader A5
		Lay leader A6
Church B	Pastor B	Lay leader B1
		Lay leader B2
Church C	Pastor C	Lay leader C1
		Lay leader C2

Church A: birth, growth, plateau, and decline. Church A started as a home church and as it grew the congregation moved to multiple locations in the area until settling in its current location. They envisioned operating a school on the property as a viable ministry in the surrounding area. Pastor A stated, "there were a good number of people [who] were faithful and diligent about [this] work over the years." Lay leaders from Church A spoke fondly of seasons of growth over three decades. Lay leader A3 recounted a time in the 1980s where Church A grew from 140 attendees to more than 240 people attending Sunday worship. A jail ministry at Church A resulted in "13 guys baptized in the creek in handcuffs." A group of five leaders hosted home services to care for the rapidly growing congregation. Lay leader A3 cited the need for two services a day as a reason for moving to the current location.

Lay leaders from Church A recalled major problems that sparked their decline. First, some church members felt they received inadequate care because new members gained more attention as the church grew. Second, the vision to operate a Christian school commenced successfully, but financial and accreditation issues caused decline forcing the school to close. Third, multiple lay leaders spoke honestly but humbly about how pastoral problems diminished their reputation in the community. Some former pastors were described as "womanizers," "having multiple affairs," "having serious problems with women," and being "bad with dollars." In a soft-spoken voice and with great humility, Lay leader A3 recounted a story regarding a former pastor's mishandling of finances.

> In 2008 we had mortgaged the church to the bank in town. The loan officer called [me] and said, "You have a problem."
>
> "What's the problem?"
>
> "The payments are not being made. You're five months behind on your payments."
>
> I said, "OK."
>
> We had a District man, and I called him and said I need to come and visit with you. I went to his office, and just as I sat down, his phone rang. The pastor at that time called and said, "What's my deacon doing in your office?"
>
> [The bank representative replied] "I don't know, he just come in, what's the problem?"
>
> "Well," the pastor said, "he does not belong there."
>
> I told the District man, "The loan officer called me from the bank said you are five months behind, and we are going to put a chain on the gate."
>
> The District man said to the pastor, "I want you to call the bank, and you talk to that loan officer, and you find out what's going on!" [The District man] come back and said, "I do

not believe it." I said, "I believe it. I understand and know what's going on. The money is being stolen."

Pastor A and the lay leaders from Church A spoke of being "heartbroken." They also knew that in a small-town this kind of story spreads quickly. They believed this event caused them to lose integrity with the community and local businesses. When Pastor A accepted the call to Church A, the once thriving congregation had diminished to less than 30 attendees at Sunday worship.

The lay leaders of Church A recalled sometime in 1993 a newly elected pastor served four years then resigned. They elected a new pastor sometime later who stayed a total of one and a half years. Another new pastor was elected who also stayed one and a half years then resigned. In between each of the elected pastors, interim pastors conducted services for the congregation. Lay leader A4 noted the interims "focused on just keeping [the church] stable. Getting repairs done and doing the things that haven't been able to be done because of the finances." Each pastor, elected or interim, brought short periods of stabilization and growth. However, upon their resignations, the church again fell into decline. Lay leader A4 stated, "About the time things started to look up then the pastor would change, and everything would go through a change again and then start growing and then another change."

Church B: birth, growth, plateau, and decline. As one of the only Pentecostal churches in the region, Church B experienced rapid growth during its early years. Pastor B stated, "Back in the mid-50s [the church] was running 200 to 300 people in Sunday School." After multi-decade seasons of growth and successful ministry, the church broke apart. Pastor B indicated a church split concerning differences over a proposed building project occurred in the 1960s marking the beginning of Church B's decline.

The church also owned extensive property. During their early years of existence, they built a sanctuary along a well-travelled road in the community. However, as the community grew a new state highway was constructed. The existing church building became invisible to the community whose travel patterns drastically changed after completion of the new highway. Pastor B remarked, "GPS couldn't help you. It was stuck back in a little neighborhood area." The church deacons pushed for the congregation to build a new building along the new highway. The pastor at that time believed this to be a poor idea and led the congregation to build a new but smaller building on the existing church foundation using materials from the deconstructed church. During this turmoil, the church deacons and a host of others decided to leave and form a new church in the same town. This began a long downward trend in attendance at Church B lasting 30 years.

During the 30-year decline, the pastor's leadership style was described as "autocratic" and "lacking financial transparency." Pastor B recalled conversations with long-term members who stayed during the 30 years of decline. He summarized how these longstanding members described this pastor's leadership.

> [He had a] very strong leadership style where he and one other guy kept the church checkbook, he didn't utilize deacons, and didn't utilize other ministers. It was just a pastor and his wife - which was a common way of leading a small-town church in those days. But it is also a common way of a church not ever outgrowing the pastor.

The pastor described above served Church B for more than 30 years, and under his leadership, the church stagnated at 25–30 attendees. After his resignation, the church elected another pastor who stayed 10 years. During this pastor's tenure, Church B maintained their size without any growth. After his resignation, another pastor served for 18-months before the

congregation asked him to leave. Afterward over five years the church saw four interim pastors come and go but remained at 25 to 30 in Sunday worship attendance. Pastor B recalled a question he received from an elderly woman when meeting with the church before he accepted the call to lead Church B. "Pastor are you going to stay here for a while or are you going to use us as a stepping stone?" Pastor B spoke of the hurt he detected in her voice as the elderly member asked the question. He sensed this same hurt permeated the hearts of the whole congregation.

Church C: birth, growth, plateau, and decline. From the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, Church C grew from 70 to 200 in attendance at Sunday worship. During this season of growth, the pastor felt led of the Lord to leave and pursue another calling. The church elected another pastor, and under that pastors' leadership the church grew. The existing church building could not seat or provide educational space for the burgeoning congregation, so Church C began building a new larger auditorium and gymnasium.

Soon after erecting the shell of the new building, a conflict arose in the congregation. Pastor C refrained from discussing the nature of the conflict, and the researcher complied with his request not to talk about the issues. Nevertheless, this church conflict resulted in the pastor's resignation. Soon another interim pastor took the helm of the church, but the conflict increased. The conflict led to "a couple of church splits." Pastor C surmised over a 10 to 11-year period a "large percentage" of people left. Despite the constant downturn, the building project continued slowly.

Lay leader C1 described attending his first church business meeting where simmering church conflict surfaced about renewing the current pastors' contract.

There was a business meeting about voting in pastor again for a certain number of years.

He had been here several years and wanted a certain amount of years of a contract. I

think the church wanted something different. After a nasty business meaning [the pastor]

walked out. That was the end!

The same lay leader describes how immediately after the pastor walked out, the business meeting

continued "as if nothing happened." A deacon raised his hand and put forward a motion to

determine what type of songs to permit in worship service. At the time, Church C paid a

minister of music, and Lay leader C1 raised the point that the church should let the music

minister make those decisions. The motion by the deacon failed, but Church C endured for a

long time without an elected pastor.

After the business meeting and the sudden departure of the pastor, an interim pastor was

appointed and served until the church elected a new pastor. Lay leader C1 described this pastor

as, "very intelligent, but he just did not fit. The church voted him in because the board

recommended him but things just kind of went down from there." Pastor C explained this pastor

"just didn't gel with the culture of the church." He originated from an urban area and failed to

successfully adjust to rural life. Lay leader A3 sadly explained, "Pretty much each time [a new

pastor] would come, the church kept dwindling." The lay leader cited family problems within

the church as a major contributor to the turmoil.

After the departure of that pastor, the church dipped to a Sunday worship attendance of

25. Under the leadership of another newly elected pastor Church C grew to 50 attendees and the

church stabilized for a time. This pastor proved popular with the congregation, and they showed

great loyalty to him. At a church business meeting, the pastor announced his leaving. Multiple

church members wanted to follow him to his next pastorate. Nevertheless, this pastor still put

forth his resignation and an interim pastor was appointed by denominational leaders. The interim served with the expectation of eventually becoming an elected pastor. However, the appointment of Pastor C by the Southern Missouri District led to the interim starting another church in the same city and some people from Church C left.

The Heart of the Turnaround Congregations

During the coding process, the researcher coded numerous segments of text with the code "heart." "Heart" was defined as a pastor or leader's description of a congregation's attitude or motivation about change. Pastor A spoke of informing Church A about the financial issues facing the congregation and the measures needed to change the situation. Pastor A recalled,

> People come up to me and said, "Pastor if we can't pay the electric bill, I'll pay for it by ourselves," or you know they wanted to take it on because they understood the importance of what us being Christians in the community meant.

Church A underwent enormous change as they navigated financial and cultural challenges, but Pastor A attributed the success of change to the attitude of the congregation. He stated,

> If you look at that original 30 people, they are still here. Four years later with all the dramatic changes that we've made they're here. And I think that speaks to their heart. I also think it speaks to their ability to get on board with the vision. They saw the vision they saw the doors were going to close unless they changed.

Church C expressed a similar attitude when faced with the possibility of losing the church facilities and moving to a temporary location. Pastor C stated,

> We asked for a vote on the move if we needed to sell the building then everybody basically was—I think one vote no—everybody else was yes. If that's what we need to do. So that was a miracle because the unity of the people.

Pastor C knew the people of Church C experienced more pain than he had because of church conflict. At the same time, the people of Church C retained a willingness to do what it took to keep the church open and move forward.

The researcher asked lay leaders at all churches to describe the congregation's attitude toward change. Lay leader B1 repeatedly used the word "willingness" to describe Church B's attitude about change. Lay leader B1 remarked,

Well, I think just the willingness of the people. I mean not everybody may have been onboard, to begin with, but there was nobody - there was no force - saying no we can't change. It wasn't like it was a big issue even for the ones that were here that may have not liked that nudge forward they wouldn't say anything. I mean not that they didn't feel like they had the right, but they wanted to see it even though it was hard for them. They wanted to see us move forward. So, they were willing to give it a try even if that change was foreign to them. I guess it's the willingness to let change happen even when it was outside their comfort zone.

Pastor B credited a congregation ready for a change as the biggest factor in his ability to lead them to turnaround. "They loved the church more than I loved the church," stated Pastor B. The congregation allowed "a couple of 20-somethings to make changes that would have cost others guys their jobs." Over time Pastor B led the people of Church B to remodel an older building replacing pews with chairs and old carpets with new. The style of worship at Church B was transformed as well. Pastor B states of the congregation,

They were ready! They had reached the place where they knew that if something didn't change, they didn't have much hope, but they had hope that [my wife and I] were the

Lord's anointed for this time and the season. So, they came alongside and helped. It's

eight years later, and they love us dearly, and we love them dearly.

Pastor B recalled a conversation with a 90-year-old church attender whose membership at

Church B started in the 1950s. The elder looked around at the new building the congregation

recently purchased and remodeled because of growth and said, "I came into this church in

revival, and I believe we're going to leave in revival."

Pastor C expressed a heart of gratitude for how the long-standing attendees of Church C

accepted change.

I've heard other stories from past where they try to do some changes or do something like

we've done but I really didn't deal with any of that - it was just really allowed. I will tell

them thank you from the podium. I will tell our seniors - I'll say - listen thank you for

letting us try things. Thank you for letting us do things that maybe you wouldn't really

care about as much.

Lay leader C2 believed the congregational attitude toward change directly resulted from Pastor

C's relational leadership style and personality. The lay leader explained,

Pastor C is a very positive person. He is positive about how he approaches situations

with people. I think that has helped a lot. I think because of him being a very personable

person to approach. You know Pastor C has a good heart. No job is too small for him at

the church. It takes everyone working together to make everything work the best way.

And I think that has been something that he has been able to communicate to everyone.

Lay leader C2 reported in his four years at the church he never heard a single negative statement

about the changes implemented by Pastor C.

The lay leaders of Church A attributed prayer as the main cause for people's readiness to change. Lay leader A1 exclaimed, "We needed more workers that would take things on and do it. I remember we were praying for a bus driver and she stepped up. Prayer!" Lay leader A4 stated when people saw God answer prayers of provision, they started "stepping up" as a part of the change. All lay leaders in Church A agreed Pastor A's ability to cast vision vastly influenced the congregation's willingness to accept change. Lay leader A6 explained Pastor A's vision-casting ability "lights something up inside us."

Given the amount of turmoil and pastoral transitions in the participating churches, the researcher asked lay leaders, "Why did you stay?" These responses included, "Because God was here!" (Lay leader A1), and "God would not let me leave!" (Lay leader A3). Lay leader A6 stated, "We are family!" Lay leader C1 proclaimed, "God put us here! We just stayed. I had no desire to go anywhere else." Lay leader A6 explained how God gave a vision to a trusted church member long ago. In the vision, the member saw, "This property - and now this church is here - this is our home church, and we couldn't leave!"

Pastor B believed the staying power of his congregation reflected the values learned in rural life. He observed,

> They are very committed and loyal. Many of them started a job at what used to be [company name], and they worked there until they retired or [the company] moved overseas. So, they worked lifetimes in a place. They shared life with people, and for them, this was their congregation. They loved it even more than I loved it at the time, and they had poured their lives out here. They raised their children here. They did all those type things, and they wanted to see it come back around.

Lay leader A1 noted each pastoral transition and crisis initiated the catalyst for congregational prayer. The lay leader mentioned, "Everyone started praying for our finances and for a pastor that could lead us, and God came through!" Her comment referred to God's sending of their current pastor who led the church to a turnaround.

The Turnaround Pastors

Assembly of God churches place a heavy emphasis on the local church pastor as the primary vision caster. Consequently, the pastor carries the sole responsibility of the decline or growth of a local church. When a church declines, the standard model for intervention is to recruit and appoint or elect another pastor. Each church in this study reported electing or denominational leadership appointing multiple pastors during the declining years. Often interim pastors filled the pulpit while the church considered the election of another pastor. Election of a new pastor often delivered momentary stability and temporary growth. Because of sustained turmoil and declining membership, each participating church eventually came under the leadership of the Southern Missouri District Council. Correspondingly, each turnaround pastor in this study arrived to their position by district appointment not by election. Each pastor contributed a unique background and history of leadership to the church, however.

Turnaround Pastor A. Pastor A accepted the leadership of Church A in 2014. He lacked experience as a Senior Pastor but felt God calling him to take this leap of faith. Pastor A arrived at vocational ministry through an atypical path. He lacked formal seminary training but grew up attending Assembly of God churches in and around a large urban center. His grandfather served as his pastor during his childhood. Later he attended a large inner-city church and then eventually served as a youth pastor in a rural Assembly of God church. Pastor A continued to work in the corporate world for three years after accepting the appointment to

Church A. Each weekend Pastor A and his wife commuted nearly 400 miles round trip to the church for three years. He voluntarily did not receive a salary from Church A because of the church's financial condition.

Pastor A excelled at business and spent most of his early life honing his leadership skills in the corporate world. He served as an executive for an organization with 16,000 employees. He described his corporate leadership experience as an asset for the task of leading Church A.

You know in the corporate world people would say to me, "You have a cult over there because these people would follow you into a burning building." Well, they were following me because they knew they'd be safe, and they knew I wouldn't let the corporate world come down on them. I think that's the same truth in the church. They know they are safe. They know I've got their back. And, as a leader, I think that's my role. It's not to do everything. It's not to be the boss. It is to lead them and to ensure that they know they are safe and that they have a place of security.

Turnaround Pastor B. Pastor B, a young man in his early thirties, grew up in a rural Missouri town of fewer than 200 people. During his childhood, Pastor B's father ministered as the pastor of a non-denominational church even though ordained with the Assemblies of God. During Pastor B's high school years, he and his family attended an Assemblies of God church in a town of about 3,000 people. The church had an attendance of about 120 and offered a good youth group. Pastor B spoke of how the church helped him "see the positive influence a healthy church could have in a small community." After marrying, Pastor B transitioned to bi-vocational youth pastoring in a rural church located in an even smaller town.

Pastor B graduated college, but lacked formal seminary training when he accepted the pastorate of Church B. He described his background and initial thoughts about pastoring the stagnated church with humility.

> So, my world was the business world, and I knew the Bible. Occasionally as a youth pastor, I filled in and preached on weekends at small country churches. And so, I didn't come in here thinking. All right, this is a turnaround church. I came in thinking, well it's a small-town church and let's see where the Lord can take this.

Pastor B worked as a purchasing agent for a feed store in the first few years of his pastorate. Over the last few years, Pastor B completed a Bachelor of Arts in Christian Management, a Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry, and currently works on a Master of Divinity through Global University.

Turnaround Pastor C. Pastor C worked as an associate pastor for 20 years in a variety of locations. This included seven years as an associate at Church C. His first appointment as Senior Pastor commenced at Church C after serving elsewhere. As a high school student in 1985, Pastor C attended Church C. He spoke fondly of those days, "I am a prodigy of this church. This church paid for me to get my credentials when I was here. They invested in me." After attending Church C and serving as a volunteer for 10 years, Pastor C engaged in full-time ministry as the associate pastor at Church C. He stated, "I have a lot of history in [Church C], and those were good years." As an associate, Pastor C watched the church grow from 70 attendees to averaging 100 at Sunday worship. During this season of growth, the Senior Pastor felt led of the Lord to leave. The church elected another Senior Pastor, and under his leadership, the church grew to nearly 200 attendees. In due course, Pastor C felt called to another ministry

and left Church C to pursue his calling. After serving as an associate pastor elsewhere for eleven years, the Southern Missouri District asked Pastor C to return as the Senior Pastor of Church C.

Managing Crisis and Change Together

  Communicating change. As part of the study, each pastor described their process of communicating change. Pastor C emphasized the need to build relationships with congregants before making significant changes.

> Let the people know who you are outside of the pulpit build strong ties with your people.
> And as much as you can, let them know your heartbeat beside just being the guy behind
> the pulpit. It's amazing how people will be gracious and forgiving if they know who you
> are outside of just the preacher.

The researcher asked him to explain how he utilized those relationships to cast vision in the church. He outlined his process:

> I think vision is conveyed by constant repetition. When I present an idea to the
> congregation, I always try to present things with excitement; this is what we're going to
> be doing - we're going to try this - we're going do this - we're going to have this - and
> we're going to try and do this. The major changes like the name change are brought to a
> meeting, and we vote, but you cast that vision repeatedly to them first. You help them
> see the value of the change.

Pastor C's use of the phrase "value of the change" meant appealing to a higher purpose for the change. A higher cause, for Pastor C, always related to how Church C better served its community.

  During the first few years of his pastorate, Pastor C remained without a local church board to help him make decisions. Like all district council churches in the Assemblies of God,

the church board consists of the local pastor and denominational officials. Currently Church C progressed to the place where they chose deacons to help lead the church. Pastor C included the official deacon board in the decision-making process of the turnaround but emphasized he only dialogues with the deacon board for input and clarity instead of permission. He viewed the relationships between himself and the deacons as collaborative where the deacons helped him clarify vision and identify potential obstacles in moving forward. Pastor C admitted, however, a lack of consensus between himself and the deacons causes him to step back and reconsider an idea. Nevertheless, if he was confident the Lord directed him toward a certain goal, a lack of consensus did not prevent him from moving ahead with the goal. Lay leader C1 served on the board of deacons and described his role as,

> supportive of the pastor. He's the leader of the church. You know, to me, it's not, "No, pastor, you can't do this! No, pastor, you can't do that." I mean he's got to be a leader of the church. I know there's a balance. Honestly, he's the leader of the church, and he is ultimately responsible. We are there to support him.

Pastor C spoke of knowing the limits of his abilities in certain areas like construction. As such, he typically goes to individuals in the congregation who possess skills in the trades for advice. He walks them through the idea, asks for input, and asks questions that helped him form decisions.

Pastor B also took a relational approach to communicating change. Pastor B kept a "dream notebook" where he wrote down his ideas from his prayer time with the Lord. He often told the congregation, "I have dreams in this notebook that you are not ready for, yet." The researcher asked Pastor B to walk through the process of bringing those dreams to reality, along with how he sets priorities. Church B observed two major priorities: 1) get a new building, and

2) become a sovereign church. He decided against presenting a prepared "formal" strategic plan to the church. He believed and

MBA type" presentation to a largely blue-collar congregation was ineffective for promoting vision. Instead, the people responded to "clear vision," and they wanted to understand why a change is needed. The "why" for Pastor B, stayed couched in an appeal to a higher cause. "We're building a place for your grandkids to come. A place where your family can worship, be fed spiritually, and a place where people would be nuts not to come to." Pastor B stated once people saw the vision and understand the "why" they said, "All right, pastor. Have you heard from God?" "Yes." "Well, we know you've done your homework. We don't need to see your notes. Let's go!"

In the first few years of his pastorate, Pastor B also ministered without a local church board as a district council church. Nevertheless, he understood the necessity of engaging congregational stakeholders to get input and advice before making major changes. He quipped that even though he did not have an official board, he did have 30 or 40 people to influence toward change. When convinced an idea in the "dream notebook" needed to become a reality, Pastor B cast vision by conversing and dialoguing with key influencers. He described these conversations as "casual" and usually occurred by asking the influencer to join him on a short road trip. While driving, Pastor B introduced the new idea and asked for input. He repeated this process until he found a consensus among the influencers. Once Pastor B felt he had consensus he introduced the idea to the larger church then implemented it. Currently the church numbers allow for an official deacon board as well as multiple unpaid staff members. However, Pastor B still leads through relationship and influence. Pastor B explained,

When it comes to big decisions now, it is harder for me to get buy-in across 120 people

than it was with 20. So, I work to get buy-in from the team. I get insight by asking

pastoral staff. What are the corners that I do not see around? Where are those dark

places that I need some clarity on? What are we missing on this? I make sure I do the

same with the board. Then when my pastoral team and deacon board agree, then I can

begin to lead at a congregational level.

Pastor B felt it necessary that he provide the "big picture," but includes several people in the

process of developing and implementing a change or beginning new ministry.

Pastor A relied heavily on his corporate experience to communicate a vision for change.

He cited his use of *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (2017) by William

Bridges. "I read [the] book several years ago in preparing for a big corporate organizational

change […] and really worked that book in managing some very large transitions in the business

world." Using lessons learned in the corporate world, Pastor A developed a process for

communicating change to the church.

First, you have to identify the issue. What do you need to change?   Then you have to

sell people, show people, and convince or compel them to see that that change is needed.

Typically, when you equip people with the data or information of what needs to be done,

they will end up making the same decision you're trying to get them to go to. And so,

instead of manipulating people you are equipping them to make good decisions.

Pastor A consistently employed these principles to transition his congregants for change at

Church A.

Managing conflict. Pastor A's straightforward approach manages conflict well. He downplayed the amount of conflict experienced by the church. He viewed it as a necessary means to an end.

> I believe wholeheartedly in constructive conflict. I think it's okay for people to get into it. I don't buy into the "let's agree to disagree thing" because that's just apathy. I buy into, "if you have a strong opinion let's get into it and figure it out." What we will end up doing is finding balance. They're probably going to change me some, change themselves some, and so, I'm not afraid of that. I think as a leader you can't be afraid of conflict at all. I think you have to be willing to hit things head-on. And so, it is not unusual for people to have a nice little call that says I want to talk to you in my office and we have a discussion.

Pastor A described himself as "terribly blunt" and lacking a lot of "hidden parts." He recognized making a change of any kind creates conflict. However, he insisted once a decision was made "you stick with it no matter how tough it gets, but you got to be willing to take it on." Pastor A recounted a long-standing church member as a "constant thorn." He called the person and his wife into the church office for a meeting. In the meeting, Pastor A outlined negative statements the husband made about him to church members. Forthrightly, Pastor A expressed the husband's comments undermined the church's vision and needed to stop. If the husband persisted, he needed to leave. The wife encouraged the husband to abandon his ill will against Pastor A by calling his attention to a similar behavior in other churches. Fortunately, the husband repented and became an avid supporter of Pastor A and the direction of the church.

Pastor C also downplayed a negative idea of conflict but insisted it a natural by-product of change. He carried the vision for the transformations needed to turn the church around and

worked toward fulfilling his vision. Pastor C recognized the different perceptions of others within the congregation but knew God placed him at Church C to revitalize it. As such; he moved forward with the vision by communicating reasons for the change. For example, Pastor C believed a new name reflected the new outward focus of Church C and its current multi-generational congregation. Pastor C heard from people outside of the congregation that the old name reminded them of a retirement home. Pastor C put the name change and reasons for it before the congregation and they voted unanimously to change the name. A local lawyer agreed to help the church file the necessary documents pro-bono, and after a year of what Pastor C calls "aggravation," the church name was officially changed. The researcher asked a Lay leader C2 to describe the attitude of the congregation concerning the change. He remembered the church as responding positively and the change "energized the people." This major transition happened because of numerous smaller and successful changes by Pastor C. As the congregation saw the positive effects of change implemented by Pastor C their trust in him rose.

Pastor B readily admitted his disdain for conflict but seemed to be dealing with it more now than in early years of the turnaround. Managing conflict in Pastor B's mind connected with a personal touch intentionally seeking to minimize conflict:

By just meeting with someone person to person or by putting an arm around the shoulder Sunday morning and saying, "Hey, I love you," or sending a text message saying, "Hey, so glad you are a part of our church." It defuses and de-escalates many things on a personal level.

The researcher pushed harder asking what happened if the strategy failed to meet the goal of minimization. Pastor B stated, "Once again I try to de-escalate conflict through relationship and through explaining why and the heart." He further explained most current church conflict at

Church B centered on a miscommunication of the "why." Because the church grew from a small group to 120 attendees, this required new levels of communication to meet the needs of the congregation. Pastor B informed the deacon board and the pastoral staff of the reasons underpinning a decision. However, sometimes those reasons failed to filter down to the congregation, and people felt left out. Most conflict rose from interaction with key-leaders with whom Pastor B spent much time.

Pastor B explained the nature of the conflict more an issue of proximity as opposed to considering it a disagreement. The growth of Church B necessitated a larger meeting space. Church B purchased a large building once used for retail space and started a two-year remodeling project. To save money, volunteers from the church and community completed most of the work. Lay leaders B1 and B2 volunteered upwards of 70 hours per week for two years to demolish and reconstruct walls, strip floors, stain doors, install toilets, and a hundred other small items required for a project of this magnitude. The constant togetherness combined with long hours of physical labor naturally pushed the limits of the pastor and volunteer relationship.

Lay leader B2 refused to use the word "conflict." Instead, the lay leader used the words "growing pains" to describe relational tension. Lay leader B2 saw these "growing pains" as a natural part of a growing church. Lay leaders B1 and B2 viewed the hours together as an opportunity to learn, grow, and invest themselves into something they believed in wholeheartedly. Lay leader B1 insisted most "growing pains" for the church today are found in two areas: 1) administrating the growing numbers of ministries formed to reach people for Christ, and 2) the rapidity of role change requiring leaders to work outside their "comfort zones."

In 2010 Church B averaged 20 to 25 attendees at Sunday Worship; today they average 120. Lay leader B1, who joined the church when it numbered 50 attendees observed, "I think

anytime you have got 70 new personalities coming in there is conflict." However, the lay leader praised Pastor B's ability to manage the conflict. The lay leader stated, "There may be a little conflict, but Pastor B is good at being led by the Holy Spirit." In the Pentecostal context, "led by the Holy Spirit" describes one's ability to discern answers to problems through prayer and sensitivity to God's guidance instead of trusting in their own wisdom. Lay leader B2 continued describing Pastor B's conflict management. Lay leader B2 states of Pastor B,

> "He is a great mediator. I feel like he probably goes home and says, 'Lord why did you give me all these children,' because we are like kids. I mean sometimes we fuss, but I think at the end of the day we all come back. We realize we love each other, and we are all after the same thing."

Financial challenges and miraculous interventions. Each participating pastor described facing major challenges soon after accepting the call to their churches. Pastor A and Pastor C were unaware of the extent of financial crisis their churches faced when accepting the pastorate. A decline in membership led to a downturn in finances and hindered the church's ability to meet its financial obligations. Church A and Church C built massive buildings to accommodate once growing congregations. Now, faced with a steep decline, the enormous church buildings drained church finances.

Soon after accepting the pastorate, Pastor A discovered Church A owed nearly $10,000 in back payments to various vendors and companies. One such vendor supplied the church with propane for heating. Pastor A received a call from the propane company refusing to extend credit for propane because the church neglected to pay the previous year's bill. He described his thoughts and actions in this situation,

You know we just really began to pray. I was very honest with the people about where

we were. They were very dedicated people. They were giving people, but they were

tapped out of resources. And so, we just really had to pray that God would do something

miraculous and he did. And so, we worked out a deal with the gas [propane] company

that we would make the payments, and we would have it paid off within a month. And

we were able to do that!

With a smile on his face, Pastor A leaned forward in his chair and told the story of God's

miraculous intervention to pay the propane bill,

We had a young couple that came and gave us a big boost. They had been in a very

tragic car accident and had got a settlement, and they tithed on it. And so, that allowed us

to get in a go forward position, and we kept doing that!

Further measures stabilized Church A's finances for the future. Pastor A refrained from

receiving a salary for the first three years of his leadership. He also petitioned the Southern

Missouri District for permission to give his tithe to Church A for one year. All affiliated

ministers with the Southern Missouri District of the Assembly of God are required to give 50%

of their tithe from all income to support of district initiatives. The Southern Missouri District

agreed Pastor A's income would help the financial circumstances of Church A. Then Pastor A

led church leaders through a budgeting process and created a six-month cash reserve. Pastor A's

employer also donated money to help the church through the financial crisis. Despite these

measures, the building continued to drain church finances. Pastor A described another drastic

measure taken to allow the church body to reach financial goals.

We closed off half the building that first winter I was here. I had a good friend of mine

come in, and we determined that we could drain all the pipes in the back and shut that

down. Then we could concentrate on heating the front of the building for the winter. That

saved us about $4,000. I locked the back doors and shut the front [of the building] off, and

that is how we survived the first winter.

The researcher asked the lay leaders to describe their perception of the austerity measures taken

by Pastor A. Lay leader A6 responded,

We were just glad he was honest with us about the financial part of it, and everybody was

on board because he knows money. I mean he knows how to manage it. We just wanted

what was best for the church and how to move forward with that. He knew how to do that.

So, everybody was just in agreement. You know he was bold. He told us the truth. We

wanted the truth, and that is just what anybody wants.

To fund the construction of a new sanctuary and gymnasium, Church C borrowed money

from a local bank. The loan structure required a certain number of payments and a balloon

payment to settle the loan. A few months after taking the leadership of Church C, Pastor C

received word from the bank the balloon payment was due. Church C lacked the financial

resources to keep their commitment to the bank. Pastor C, previously a member of Church C

and an associate pastor, expressed his emotions at this moment, "I got aggravated. I knew the

names of those who signed for the loan, and nothing against them, but where are these people

now to help us with this?" Pastor C's aggravation also stemmed from not being informed of the

loan structure before accepting the pastorate. Pastor C contacted the bank to inform them of the

church's present situation.

The bank agreed to work with Church C and mandated Pastor C prove the church took

active steps to improve its financial position. The bank suggested Pastor C teach the

congregation about financial stewardship and take measure to reduce expenses. At this time, the

massive metal building remained empty, but the heat bill and upkeep of it drained the church treasury. Pastor C took the issue before the church, explained the situation, and asked for help in solving the problem. He explained,

I came to the church, and I told the church, "Here is the situation with our finances. Here's how we could lose our building. Are you willing to move if we need to move and sell the building?"

A representative of the bank met with Pastor C to help him plan for repayment. Pastor C asked the representative, "What's the worst thing that can happen?" The representative stated, "The worst that can happen is you might lose the building." Pastor C admitted he felt ill-equipped to manage this crisis. In the past, Pastor C worked for ministries where support staff handled most administrative tasks. At Church C, he led almost every program of the church: student ministry, worship leader, preaching and managing all the finances. Pastor C reflected on the situation and exclaimed, "if you don't do something you might not survive!" Therefore, Church C decided to place their property up for sale hoping to at least recover the equity in the building. They listed the property with a realtor but in 10-months only one person showed a slight interest. In the meantime, Pastor C led the church in a plan that restricted access to the metal building housing the gymnasium and unfinished sanctuary, winterized it, and closed it down until the finances improved. Impressed by their initial efforts the bank agreed to allow more time for repayment.

Pastor C also realized the church lacked funds to pay his salary. He describes his thoughts when coming to this realization.

I remember a few months into it I tell my wife, "They can't afford to pay us!" [The salary] wasn't a tremendous amount, but it was a decent salary for this area. I was OK

with it. I remember thinking, "They can't afford to do this!" I began to think about what

I could do. I thought, God what do I need to do to help this?   What can I do?

Pastor C investigated options for securing employment outside of the church. Before taking a

second job, however, Pastor C received two phone calls from former colleagues. Neither

colleague knew of the financial crisis but believed the Lord wanted them to give monthly

financial donations to Pastor C for a pre-determined amount of time. As the church's income

increased the monthly donations from these former colleagues decreased. These donations

permitted Pastor C to only take 25% of his original salary from the church making it possible for

the church to survive. The actions taken to reduce expenses and the financial support of Pastor

C's colleagues made it possible for Church C refinance the mortgage with another financial

institution. Pastor C proudly stated, "We have never missed a payment!"

Pastor C directly ties Church C's financial turnaround to a renewed commitment to

missions giving. Immediately after informing Church C of the financial crisis, Pastor C believes

God impressed on his heart to financially support missionaries. Laughing, Pastor C remarked,

I understand it doesn't make sense. I just told the whole church the dilemma we're in

financially, and now we're going to spend $50 more each month, but I felt the church

trusted me to lead them in that direction.

Pastor C elaborated how from that moment the church's financial situation improved. Lay leader

C1 supported Pastor C's assertion, "The key to the turnaround in this church, bar none, has been

getting involved with missions. That was a key leadership commitment, and the church is

blessed because of it."

In contrast, Church B did not experience financial difficulties and problems. As an older

congregation, and because of good financial stewardship in the past, the church financially

stabilized. Though Church B possessed a firm financial foundation, they largely remained

unaware of how Pastor B and his wife struggled to make ends meet.

> [The congregation] went from having a retired pastor who owned his own home to a
> young couple who just left a good job with benefits and stuff moving into the [church]
> parsonage. My wife and I almost starved our first couple of years. A lot of ministry
> expenses went on our credit card, such as propane for the parsonage. We went to do
> hospital visits in our vehicle, and we were out our gas money.

Pastor B however, quickly took some of the responsibility for this struggle. Church B was a

district council church, as such, the Southern Missouri District executive leadership acted as the

church board. Pastor B kept daily oversight of the administration and direction of the church and

its mission. The Southern Missouri District acted as trustees of Church B's assets, advised

Pastor B on any financial matters, and ensured proper use of church funds. This meant if Pastor

B needed a salary increase, he appealed to the District Council. Pastor B recalled his frustration

at simply lacking the knowledge of how to navigate the financial relationship between Church B

and the Southern Missouri District Council. Pastor B recalled not "knowing anything about

administration" or "how to bring that up" to the Presbyter. Not knowing how to approach his

leadership caused Pastor B to take on church expenses personally making it necessary to work an

outside job.

Church cultural changes. Each pastor related the need to change various cultural

aspects of their respective churches. Assemblies of God churches are both Pentecostal and

Evangelical. As such, they believe in and encourage supernatural manifestations of the Holy

Spirit privately as well as in public gatherings. These manifestations include, but are not limited

to, speaking in an unknown tongue (see Acts 2, 10, & 19; 1 Corinthians 12–15), the

interpretation of tongues speech (see 1 Corinthians 14:27), verbal messages of wisdom and knowledge (see 1 Corinthians 12:8), and public prophetic utterances (1 Corinthians 12:10). Assembly of God churches believe these supernatural gifts work to build up God's people when properly exercised. The Apostle Paul addressed some abuses of supernatural gifts in the Corinthian church but never advised the cessation of these practices. He instructed the church to allow for these gifts although "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14:10). At Church A, the alleged exercise of supernatural gifts during public worship services brought chaos instead of edification.

Pastor A viewed the chaos as a hindrance to church growth. He believed this was an area of church life needing correction and alignment with biblical instruction and church vision. Pastor A explained,

> You know you may have somebody jumping up in service and saying, 'Oh, I've got a word! 'You had people just shouting out in the most bizarre ways, and I think to have to learn that behavior. Part of my responsibility was teaching, albeit difficult, that God deserves order and He's a gentleman. He doesn't interrupt. He doesn't send twelve messages for the same day. He brings clarity. He doesn't bring confusion. We had to call some of it out, and I think that was a culture shock because people thought it was okay not to be prepared for service.

Pastor A confronted this problem with love and a firm conviction the church needed cultural change so people would come and stay. He knew some church people thought he was "stifling the Spirit." This is a pejorative phrase used in Pentecostal circles in reference to someone who restricts the exercise of superatural gifts in a public worship service. In the researcher's experience, this accusation of "stifling the Spirit" comes from those who disagree with a new

model or order of the public worship service. Pastor A kept the vision of connecting people to Jesus in the forefront as he challenged people to change their paradigm about spiritual gifts. He also lovingly confronted members whose actions caused confusion to the congregation during worship. He set a new expectation of order allowing for biblical instructions in the exercise of spiritual gifts but also kept in mind new people in the congregation unfamiliar with such practices.

A second cultural issue for Church A to resolve laid in the area of music. Music remains vital to the life of Assembly of God churches and the Sunday worship experience. Excellent music and vocals act as attractional tools believed essential to grow a church. Musical styles vary from church to church, but emotional and heartfelt music and singing are part and parcel to Assemblies of God and Pentecostal churches. At Church A, the music and vocals seemed lackluster and viewed by Pastor A as a deterrent to attracting and maintaining new attendees.

Pastor A approached this musical and vocal challenge in much the same way as their problem with chaos of public worship: head-on, with love, and an appeal to a higher cause.

> I had people on the worship team here that couldn't sing—that wasn't their calling, it wasn't their gifting, but they loved being on the platform. Then as you try to improve and become the best music you can for the ears of our God, there was a rubbing point. When I began to say let's determine what your gifting is, and I don't think it's this because we're not going to be able to accomplish our vision if we continue this. That created some noise, and that created people who were complaining and saying, 'But that's my uncle, and he's been on that team for 40-years!' But your uncle is deaf now, and he can't sing. So, let's get serious. You must be very resolute.

Pastor A believed his resoluteness in keeping the vision of excellence helped create an

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atmosphere of "self-selection." He noticed when he stayed true to the vision for the music

ministry and appealed to a standard of excellence, people realized their talents befitted other

areas of service. When people recognized this new expectation for music and vocals, they

removed themselves from one ministry and joined another. This minimized confrontation and

conflict. This cultural change led to the music ministry leaders at Church A holding auditions

two times per year. The ministry now requires team members to sign a yearly contract clearly

outlining expectations for participation.

Pastor B outlined one of the greatest cultural challenges faced during the early stages of

leading the church to turnaround. Most members in their sixties and seventies attended the

services, while Pastor B and his wife, in their early twenties at the time, took responsibility for

leading every ministry of the church. "We had people who were willing to make cookies or

show up at events, but because of their age they weren't as energetic as [my wife and I]." Most

members attended Church B long before Pastor B's birth. Pastor B jokingly spoke of how many

in the congregation endearingly referred to him as one of their "grandkids." He further

explained, "Even though it was an endearment it's kind of hard to ask a spiritual grandma for

extra money when you're a full-grown adult!"

The researcher asked Pastor B to identify a shift of congregational perception of him as

"grandkid" to "pastor." He quickly noted that rather than a single event occurrence, a series of

opportunities to lead the congregation through smaller incremental changes happened.

"Leading," said Pastor B, "gave me the opportunity to say, 'OK guys, I love you, and you love

me. Here's what we need to do!'" The researcher asked Pastor B to provide an example of

leading Church B through change.

So, some of the biggest wins that happened were whenever we renovated our old church building. We had old carpet that must have been 35-year-old, windows were shot out, doors were out, and I led our church to go ahead and renovate. I used some leadership capital and said, 'Guys you know we're going to change buildings someday. We know that's God's will for us, but we got to take care of what we have because people are making decisions every day whether they go to church or not. And we want to make sure we make good impressions.' So, leading through those type of situations helped me.

The "leadership capital" spoken of by Pastor B pointed to a surplus of credibility he established by successfully navigating the church through smaller changes. The use of one's "leadership capital" also pointed to the idea of risk. If a leader used the surplus of credibility and the change rendered ineffective the leader loses authority with the followers. In large part, Pastor A attributed the shift in perception and the building of credibility to pastoral care opportunities. He stated,

being with families when loved ones passed away, when they were in the hospital, or when they were experiencing situations in their family. Shepherding people in those big moments helped establish, "That's my pastor. That's the guy who you know was there when I was in surgery. That's the guy who married my grandkids. That's the guy who got my son back in church. These things helped make that shift between our little kid pastor or preacher.

In further conversation with the congregation, Pastor B observed a general cultural feeling that a small rural church deserves a below average pastor. He noted because the church lacked finances to pay a living wage with the enormous amount of work required, many pastors

used the church to only obtain pastoral experience as a stepping stone to a larger work. He related a story of feeling this same temptation.

One morning Pastor B presided over the funeral of a deceased church member then rushed home to mow the grass at the church. Pastor B recollected his internal conversation at this moment of frustration,

This is weird, so weird! This is a weird dynamic of a small church. They entrust me to

bury their loved one and minister in time of grief, but they do not value my time enough

that someone would come and mow the churchyard in the afternoon.

He recalled several conversations with people to help them see their need to step up and take ownership of tasks. The researcher asked Pastor B to describe how he felt during this early season of needing congregational help. He stated this time was,

overwhelming or lonely are some of the words that describe much of the early ministry

here because I did not have any key leaders. I didn't bring a staff with me. I'm learning

everything on the fly because I hadn't been to seminary at the time. So, everything is just

overwhelming.

Pastor B also related a time when he felt overwhelmed leading Church B. He contacted a denominational leader saying, "No one prepared us for this, and I don't know where to turn for help!" The denominational leader graciously connected Pastor B with someone who agreed to coach and encourage him.

Moving the church from inside focus to outside involvement. The most consistent cultural change experienced by all participating churches came with a redirection of the church's focus from maintenance and survival to outreach and mission. While each church moved at a

different pace, all churches eventually established ministries focused on serving the community around them.

All the lay leaders interviewed at Church A agreed a change of attitude toward ministry was a key to the church's turnaround. Ministry grew into what Lay leader A4 described as something one "plants and gives away." Instead of a few individuals leading everything, the goal became leader multiplication. The need to multiply ministry meant some lay leaders surrendered leadership positions they occupied for many years. In other cases, it meant beginning ministries with the intention of equipping and empowering someone else to eventually take leadership of it.

Pastor A recounted one lay leader who, at his arrival, led virtually every ministry in the church. He knew this lay leader remained vital to the future success of Church A but also recognized the leader was wore out. Pastor A approached this leader and explained by doing everything, the lay leader was "stealing opportunities from everyone else." Pastor A worked with the lay leader to build a culture of replication and releasing of ministry. He appealed to a higher cause by insisting lay leaders always train replacements for the sake of ministry continuation.

"The big change I am seeing since [Pastor A's] been here is we are outside the church more than the inside of the church," declared Lay leader A6. Church A grew from 30 attendees to an average of 300 in attendance at Sunday worship over five years. One of the first areas of major growth derived from the Wednesday night youth ministry. As new people arrived into the church and received Christ as Savior, they received discipleship and in turn were encouraged to reach other people for Christ. This vision and expectation resulted in people stepping up to drive a church van. After the first and second van filled up, the church purchased a school bus.

Anywhere from 100 to 120 youth now currently attend the Wednesday evening youth activities and youth service. Volunteers also provided meals for all youth in attendance. Youth also received non-perishable items to take home to ensure food provision between services. Church A served an impoverished community where many residents depended on social services such as welfare and disability to survive. Pastor A described the situation vividly.

> So, there's a lot of drugs and a lot of alcoholism. People are living on disability or off the government then, of course, they are not getting the nutrition and health or the things they need because they're typically hocking those things to buy cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. So, bad dental care, bad hygiene, and all those things. We have kids that come on Wednesday's that their parents are living in their cars and they only clean things these kids are getting is when they come here.

Drug and alcohol abuse ravages rural communities in the United States of America. The *2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (2016) reported 37.8% of youths ages 12-20 in non-metro areas used alcohol. The study also reported 14.2% of children in non-metro areas used illicit drugs and 11.2% used marijuana. *The 2018 Report on Missouri Poverty Report* (2018) indicated rural areas in Missouri retain limited access to healthcare. Church A met the challenge of rural poverty and addiction head on.

Lay leader A4 along with others pioneered a highly successful biblically based recovery ministry at Church A. Church A literature describes the ministry as "a multi-function ministry reaching those with addictions and those affected by addiction." Each week 30 to 40 adults gather together for an interactive Bible study and to hear stories of how others overcame addiction. The ministry provided childcare for children under 12 and served a meal to all participants. This ministry also served two prisons located in the area each week. Many who

attended these ministries received salvation and assimilated into the local church body. Pastor A proudly said, "We have some of the most reputable gangsters in this community attending church here and leading some of our ministries. So when people look at them, and they go, I can't believe this!" Two of those "notable" people started a ministry helping people who struggle with other issues besides addiction, such as, financial management.

Ministry to children in these rural Assembly of God churches remained integral to reaching people in their communities. At the beginning of Pastor B's tenure, the congregation consisted primarily of senior men and women with adult children. Most of the adult children and grandchildren moved out of the community for work or educational opportunities. The outmigration for employment or education created a loss of potential church members. For decades a sports equipment company provided employment for the people in this rural community. When the company closed and moved operations overseas working age people moved to find better employment opportunities. Although large numbers of children lived in the community, Church B lacked virtually any children in attendance. Pastor B's dream involved ministry to the children of his rural town. He presented his vision to a minister outside his congregation who specialized in ministry to children. Pastor B asked him to come and "plant a children's church just like you would a normal church" and the minister came. Next Pastor B appealed to the congregation to think about the families they knew with children and invite them to participate in this new venture. With great joy, Pastor B recalled, "When we started, we saw kids and some young families start coming, and we were like, 'Hey, this could work!'" For Church B, the children's ministry birthed new life for this once dying congregation.

Intentional involvement by the participating churches in their rural communities also opened doors to reach new audiences with the gospel of Christ. Pastor C led his congregation to

reach out to various community stakeholders. He accomplished this by modeling what he calls "relational evangelism." Pastor C served as a police chaplain in another state and took steps in his new community to train as a police chaplain. After some initial resistance from the local police department, a door eventually opened, and he ministered as their police chaplain. Chaplaincy allowed Pastor C to widen his network of friends and build relationships in the community.

> If we want to reach people, we have to go where the people are – they are not stopping by our building - it's not a stretch for me to do that. I just do what I do on a regular basis. If you go to a gym or a particular restaurant—I am in places about every week—I show my faced—I've met so many people.

Today, Pastor C serves as chaplain for the police as well as the county ambulance service with 90 employees. Pastor C's service as the chaplain also opened doors recently for him to teach at the police academy.

> I could tell you stories about personally leading people to Jesus in a police car and a city park. I could tell stories of praying with police officers and having a corporate prayer at a police station. It's pretty awesome!

Pastor C's modeling of evangelism trickled into the congregational culture. He related a story of a church member who caught the vision of ministry.

> A lady in the church began to see the connection and wanted to do gifts for the police department one year – we did it. The next year, she wanted to do it even bigger, and we ended up going to like five municipalities with gifts which was huge last year. Every time you do those things you stretch the tentacles of your church farther into other places in the community.

Lay leader C2 remarked about how Church C committed a year to pray for each police officer in the community: the church put out a roster with the names of all the officers and members signed up to pray for the officers individually. Lay leader C1 described the emphasis of church events before Pastor C's arrival,

> You know a lot of things we did before [Pastor C] coming were church organized.
> Always organized around the church family. We would have a thing in the Spring,
> church barbecue. We would have Fall deal for the church too. I don't remember having
> any community-oriented events.

Today the church participates in several community-wide events like parades and an annual Halloween event.

Church B created intentional involvement in its community in a variety of ways. Lay leader B1 explained how a crazy idea turned into a ministry to youth. The lay leader worked in the public school system and noticed many students lacked basic life skills or what the lay leader called "common sense stuff." Lay leader B1 took the idea to Pastor B, and he was "receptive to the idea" but wanted the lay leader to develop the idea further. The idea took shape, and eventually birthed new ministry. Basic life skills like sewing, soap making, and "how to skin an animal" (Lay leader B2) combined with a Bible study for youth attracted upwards of 25 attendees weekly. The success of this endeavor opened the door to begin a "full-blown youth group." Over the last eight years, the church started ministries to single parents, cooked thousands of hot dogs to help support the cities Halloween festivities, formed community classes, and firmly entrenched itself as a positive stakeholder in the community. The more involvement in their community, the more opportunities arose in forming relevant ministries. Each church in this study formed those new ministries differently.

Creating relevant ministry. The researcher pressed the participating lay leaders to describe the process for starting and leading ministries in their churches. When asked this question at Church A, laughter filled the room, and group of lay leaders jokingly said, "Pastor tells us what to do, and we do it!" Then after a short reflection, the team spoke of an open atmosphere where ideas were encouraged and fostered by Pastor A. Many of the lay leaders spoke of how they felt they could bring any idea to Pastor A because they knew he would take it seriously. However, they trusted Pastor A's judgment to let them know if they should move forward or hold off. Lay leader A5 emphasized dialogue with Pastor A as a vital part of the process to form any new idea into ministry. Lay leader A4 excitedly said, "For me, I went from leading ministries to leading people that are leading ministries now." Lay leader A4 believes he learned to do this through interaction with Pastor A. The researcher asked the same lay leader to describe the kind of people presently stepping up into leadership at Church A. His answer beautifully described the current atmosphere of Church A.

> If you look across our congregation now, there are a lot of people that are what I call unchurched. Or, they spent their first 10 years in church and then the next 20 years out of the church. So, these are the type of people that are now getting involved in becoming ministry leaders, and they are on fire for Jesus.

Lay leader C1 estimated 75–80% of attendee's at Church C currently engage in ministry. The lay leader remembered a day when very few people interacted in anything at Church C, but now people are stepping up. This lay leader believed the catalyst for the increased involvement lies in how the congregation sees God working and wants to be a part of the action. Lay leader C2 credited new or reshaped ministries for the increased involvement. Lay leader C2 spoke specifically about ministry to children and youth. "If the kids come," the lay leader states, "the

parents will come." This axiom proved true for Church C, and with an increase of kids, new volunteers stepped up to help. Both lay leaders readily attributed the greater participation of members in ministry to the leadership of Pastor C who constantly looked for places to connect people to ministry.

The researcher asked Lay leaders C1 and C2 to explain how an attendee at Church C gets involved in ministry. Both lay leaders stated, "Pastor C is not afraid to ask!" The lay leaders at Church C made no mention of a formal process for members to discover gifts and talents. One might fill out a form expressing interest in volunteering in certain ministries, but this system is rarely used. Instead, Pastor C looked for places to get people involved and asked them to serve. Lay leader C2 stated,

> Unless you're asked, most people assume things are getting done. I am sure it can't be easy for Pastor C to ask people to do things, I know it's hard for me to ask people for something. There are all different personalities in the church, but you have to be the type of person that says, "Can you help me out." I think that if Pastor C is asking me to help because there is a real need. But getting people to do one thing gets them involved then they buy-in.

After someone at Church C accepted the invitation and agreed to serve, the appropriate ministry leader trained and mentored them in a ministry area. Ministry leadership carried an expectation of building ministry teams. Volunteers served on a rotating schedule to avoid burnout and to ensure volunteers participated in Sunday worship. Depending on the size of the team, a member served one or two times per month. "When people get stuck doing the same task every Sunday, they eventually only come to church to do their job," stated Lay leader C1. Therefore, multiple volunteers were trained to prevent burnout.

The lay leaders interviewed at Church B described ministry formation as a collaborative process. Ideas for ministry materialized from Pastor B, attendees, and lay leaders. The lay leaders of Church B stated they felt comfortable taking ideas to Pastor B and trusted him to help refine the vision. They also trusted him to tell them "no" when a ministry idea conflicted or did not align with the overall vision or pushed the church beyond their current leadership or financial capacity. Lay leader B2 stated,

> I'm an idea guy which gets me in trouble sometimes because I don't flesh things out, so it's something I'm learning. I've learned over time with Pastor B that just because I have an idea doesn't mean it's ready.

Lay leader B1 described the process of ministry formation as an active dialogue with Pastor B. The lay leader spoke of bringing an idea for ministry to Pastor B and he requested to,

> have me think about [the idea] then come back when I had a clearer vision. I think he truly believes that the people - those he's chosen to bring in closer - really are called to be where they're at so if we have something laid on our heart, he doesn't just blow it off. I mean he really will help you cultivate [the idea] if you come to him sincerely. He will help you. He doesn't just say okay then you take [the idea] and you're just on your own. He will help you even if he sees you fail miserably. He'll just kind of help you walk through that until you get to where you need to be with [the idea]. Pastor C just kind of plays [the idea] out to see if it makes sense in our culture. I think that's is a big thing with him because it has to make sense with the culture of our area. Then he just goes with it. I mean he will help you figure out how it's going to look and let you go with it.

Creating hospitable environments. During the interviews with pastors and lay leaders, the idea of hospitality emerged often. Lay leader C2 attended Church C in the early stages of the turnaround and described his first visit.

> I can honestly tell you, my first Sunday, when I came here about four years ago, I was
> impressed with how personable and friendly the people were. Honestly, with some past
> experiences I've had in church, this hasn't been the case. When you go there as
> somebody new, you wouldn't have someone to say, "Hi," or shake your hand. Well,
> that's just kind of how it was. It was not there. At Church C, I sensed that personable
> feeling from the very first Sunday we ever attended. People wanted to do everything to
> make you feel welcome, and it was a neat thing.

Lay leader C2 believed the hospitality of the congregation reflected Pastor C's commitment to building relationships in the community and the church.

Recently Church C remodeled the church foyer to reflect their hospitable character. As one passed through the glass entry doors of Church C, they entered a very modern but small foyer. The foyer contained hardwood floors, a welcome kiosk, fresh paint, and modern lighting. Pastor C remarked, "[The foyer] is the first thing people see when they walk into the church, and I want them to see we care."

Lay leaders B1 and B2 also started attending Church B in the early stages of the turnaround. Both lay leaders were in their thirties, married, and both had small children. The researcher asked them to describe how the congregation received them when they first attended. Lay leader B1 recounted her thoughts after visiting Church B for the first time. The lay leaders spouse previously attended the church with his family as a small child, but quit Church B for more than 20 years but,

they were very welcoming. So, to see a little [name] come back to church, it was kind of like a homecoming. They were all like oh there's little [name]!   I mean, it was like you never left kind of thing. They were very welcoming!

Lay leader B2's only connection to Church B depended on his friendship with Pastor B. This lay leader described how the congregation of mostly senior citizens received him on his first visit.

I started coming on Wednesdays. My wife worked on Sunday at a different place, so we said let's come on Wednesdays. The people were very friendly!   I'm a little different than they're used to. I like wearing shorts, I have tattoos, and my ears are gauged. I dye my hair quite frequently. It was cool showing up like crazy wild in the way I look, but then they were still very much like, "hey [name] how's it going?" Acceptance of that nature was cool.

The researcher asked Pastor B to describe the older congregation's receptivity to new people. He said,

My people loved new people with wide open arms which I didn't have to teach them to do because they were just naturally warm and opening and loving. I just helped them to steward that great aspect of our church culture. And so, they've always been good for new people. They may not always learn their names but when you're 85 or 90-years old learning 20 or 30 new names - we give them a pass. But they have always been warm and open I didn't have to teach them that they already had it. So, I was able to build upon that friendliness.

When Church B purchased and remodeled a new larger building to accommodate the growing numbers, the friendly and welcoming nature of the congregation influenced architectural decisions. The foyer of Church B consisted of a wide-open design full of natural

light. Purposefully positioned, couches, tables, and chairs facilitated group conversations. Attendees receive a free cup of coffee at the coffee bar. Massive vinyl letters on the wall above the coffee bar reminded people "no one belongs here more than you!" The foyer also acted as a casual meeting place throughout the week for church attendees and the community. Pastor B recalled the previous smaller buildings foyer.

> In our old church, the fellowship was very difficult because the old churches were built
> shotgun style. So, you walk into a very narrow corridor that opened into the sanctuary. It
> worked like the cattle chute on a farm, it pushed people through, and it pushed people
> out, but it didn't facilitate any fellowship. We knew that when we designed a new
> building, we needed to facilitate the congregation's desire to love on people. And so
> that's been great!

Church B accomplished their goal of providing a place where people connected and enjoyed each other's company. Lay leader B1 remarked new people might feel overwhelmed by how many people greet them, offer them a cup of coffee and a snack, and start conversations with them in the foyer.

> When he first arrived at Church A, Pastor A noticed when the service ended the people quickly cleared out of the building.

> If you came to this church four years ago, by the time we said Amen this place cleared
> out. You could not find anyone in the building. By the time I walked from the pulpit to
> the front door everyone's gone.

Pastor A believed building relationships within the church was directly linked to creating a culture of accountability. He also believed relationships connected people with the church and enabled them for more involvement in serving others. He noted,

Now we seldom need to get people to stick around. We created the café. We took out a

Sunday school room over there, broke down the walls, and built a café over there.

Everybody thought we were crazy. They were like, "You don't have a cafe in church!

We have free coffee. Why would we pay for coffee?" Do you know what happened

within three weeks after we opened the café?   Now it takes an hour to clear this building

out after church because everybody is sticking around and visiting.

Lay leader A5 pointed to the café as a place to "build community," where people learned to "lean

on each other" and "love each other again."

Growth

Each participating church experienced an increase in Sunday worship attendance. The

growth occurred incrementally. Most churches saw a substantial increase in attendance after

year two or three. Each pastor stated their frustration at the slow growth process. However, each

believed God helped them to lead the congregation at an appropriate pace of change. Lay

leaders B1 and B2 emphatically stated they would unhesitatingly "jump back in" and help turn

their church around. Pastor C only hoped as changes and growth occurred, his graciousness

flowed to all people. Pastor B looked back on the turnaround and said he would not change

anything he has done. Each pastor, however, pointed to the current reality that sustaining growth

trends requires more change in the future.

Pastor B and the lay leaders of Church B agreed growth revealed an unexpected

leadership reality. Lay leader A1 described this realization related to issues of personal capacity.

Some leaders functioned well when the church hosted 50 in attendance but felt overwhelmed in

leadership when the church reached 80 attendees. Pastor B observed as the church grew from 35

attendees to 70 attendees, leadership shifted. At first, Pastor B chose leaders based on vocality

and finances. He intentionally targeted those who voiced a willingness to lead and those who

contributed financially. As the Church B grew, leaders emerged from their involvement in the

church and their investment of time. Pastor B noticed influence arose and leaders came from the

group who were "with me helping me at the church or helping do projects or doing ministry."

As the church grew from 70 to 120 attendees, Pastor B increased his time for pastoral

care and kept office hours. As a result, leadership at the church needed specializations and

focus. Instead of one person leading multiple ministries, Pastor B appointed one or two people

with the oversight of a single ministry and the development of leaders themselves. Today Pastor

B continually reevaluates what leadership shifts need to occur to move the church beyond 120.

Growth also led to a renewed excitement about the future. Lay leader A6 described the

new atmosphere at Church A as "electric." The lay leader continued, "There's just a feeling that

it's awesome to be together with your family." Lay leader A1 stated, "We have an excitement

and expectancy about what God's going to do, and we hold on to that."

Chapter 4 Summary

The interviews conducted with pastors and lay leaders provided insight into the lived

experiences of those who led declining rural churches to a turnaround. This hermeneutic

phenomenological study sought to answer a research question which focused on the lived

experiences of pastors and lay leaders of churches in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches.

Through a conceptual framework, the researcher explored the participants' lived experiences.

The conceptual framework of this study consists of four interpretive lenses informing the

researcher's investigation of the phenomenon of rural church turnaround: church birth, plateau,

decline and turnaround, the rural context, an exploration of the lived experiences of pastors and

lay leaders, and how change priorities were established by the leadership of each church. These

lenses formed a hermeneutic through which interpretation from the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders continued in the next chapter. Timely results of this study contribute to address the gap existing in church revitalization literature. This study uniquely describes the relationship between pastors and lay leaders who led their declining churches to a turnaround.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Introduction

Rural assemblies are declining in Sunday worship attendance and finding it challenging to sustain the mission of God. "Many of the 7,000 churches that close each year in America are in rural settings. Thousands more are either in decline or struggling to survive" (Russell, 2014, p. 36). Rural churches require "intentional intervention and transformational change" to reverse the trend of decline (Russell, 2014, p. 36). The researcher utlized a qualitative phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of three pastors and 10 lay leaders at three rural Missouri turnaround churches. Participants related their lived experiences of leading their churches from plateau and decline to growth. Interviews were conducted using a semistructured interview style. The results of this study may provide insight in understanding the experiences of rural pastors and lay leaders leading a declining or plateauing church to turnaround.

This chapter explains the results of this study in relation to the research question posed in this study. Furthermore, this chapter will provide a summary and discussion of the study results in relationship to the literature guiding this study. Limitations of the study and implication for practice, policy and theory are also discussed. The researcher offers recommendations for further study and conclusions.

Summary of Results

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches that were in plateau or decline but have experienced a turnaround. A *turnaround church* is one that plateaued or declined in average Sunday worship attendance over an extended period but reversed the trend experiencing growth. Churches whose leaders have led them to a turnaround are sometimes

called *comeback* or *revitalized churches* (Costner, 2017; Martin, 2015; Mays, 2011). This study

sought to understand the nature of the turnaround as experienced by pastors and lay leaders in

three rural Missouri Assembly of God church settings.

The researcher interpreted the phenomenon of rural church turnaround hermeneutically

through a process "reading, reflective writing, and interpretation" (Kafle, 2011, p. 192).

Following Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological research activities, the researcher turned to

the phenomenon of interest, explored that phenomenon as was lived, described the phenomenon

through writing and rewriting, and reflected on "essential themes, which characterize[d] the

phenomenon" (p. 31). Through the hermeneutic process, the researcher discovered two themes

and 10 sub-themes present in participant descriptions of the phenomena. Table 4 shows an

outline of themes and sub-themes present in the data.

Table 4

Themes and Sub-Themes of the Lived Experiences of Pastors and Lay leaders

Theme and sub-theme
Theme 1. Pattern of the turnaround experiences
Sub-Themes
1a. Birth, growth, plateau, and decline
1b. Interventions and moments of stabilization
1c. Turnaround pastor and follower effects
1d. Navigating crisis and change
1e. Growth
Theme 2. Language of the turnaround experiences
Sub-Themes

Theme and sub-theme
2a. Vision
2b. Willing/Willingness
2c. Outside
2d. Welcoming, Friendly, Friendliness, and Personable
2e. Prayer

Discussion of Results

This study sought to answer the following research question:

RQ$_1$:   What are the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of churches in rural

Missouri Assembly of God churches who have led their churches to turnaround

after experiencing a plateau or decline in attendance?

Pastors and lay leaders interviewed described their experiences differently. However, the lived

experiences of all participants revealed a shared pattern of church turnaround experience.

Participants also shared a similar language that gave meaning to their turnaround experiences.

Theme 1: Pattern of turnaround experiences. The data revealed a consistent

experiential pattern of a turnaround in participating churches. Figure 2 illustrates a pattern of

turnaround emerging from the data. Sub-themes establishing the pattern of a turnaround are
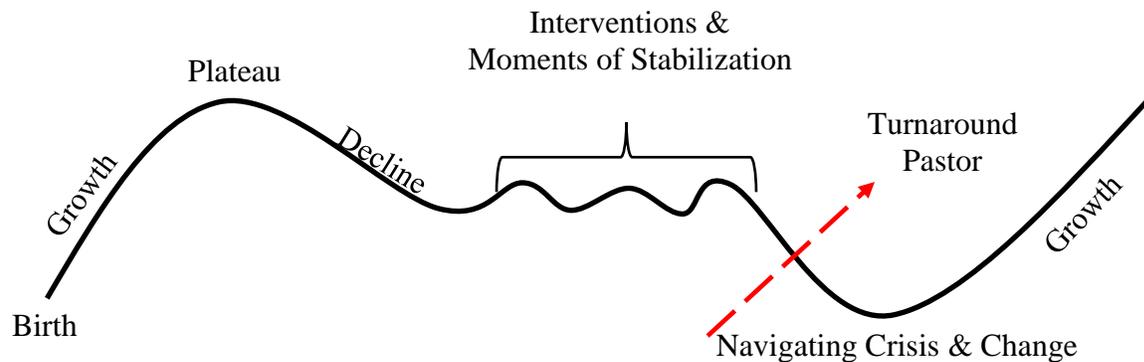
discussed below in detail.

Figure 2. Pattern of turnaround experience.

Birth, growth, plateau, and decline. Each church began with a group of people committed to reaching their community for Christ. Over time the church grew, formed ministries, held worship services, baptized converts, and educated believers. Each church plateaued in attendance because of major pastoral leadership missteps and the churches began a downward trend of decline. Church A began as a home church and over three decades grew to a Sunday attendance of 240. However, pastoral leadership issues brought problems to the church causing a decline in attendance. Some former pastors were described as "womanizers," having multiple affairs," and being "bad with dollars." In time Church A declined to less than 30 in Sunday attendance. In the 1950s Church B grew to more than 200 in Sunday school attendance. However, the conflict between the pastor and deacons over the need to build a new building causing a church split. Eventually, Church B declined to about 25 worshippers on Sunday. Church C grew to a Sunday worship attendance of 200 and began building a new sanctuary and gymnasium complex. The conflict between the pastor and church arose resulting in church split and a decline in attendance.

Interventions and moments of stabilization. Intervention attempts to reverse the declining attendance came in the form of electing new pastors by the congregation or the

appointment of interim pastors by denominational officials. I struggled to keep track of the number of interim pastors who served Church C. During the member checking process, Pastor C helped correct my understanding but admitted he too struggled to keep track. In five years, four interim pastors served Church B. During that time the church maintained a Sunday attendance of 25 to 30 attendees. The election or appointment of new pastors brought temporary stabilization to each church. However, with the resignation or removal of each of the elected or appointed pastors the churches in this study lost momentum and returned to decline. Lay leader A3 explained, "Pretty much each time [a new pastor] would come, the church kept dwindling." Another lay leader reported, "About the time things started to look up then the pastor would change, and everything would go through a change again and then start growing and then another change" (LLA4). Intervention by denominational officials to appoint interim pastors or by church leaders electing a new pastor was necessary. However, the results of the appointments and elections did not always bring benefit to the church.

Turnaround pastors and follower effects. To save the church, denominational leaders appointed the pastors interviewed in this study to lead the plateauing and declining churches. None of the participating pastors received their pastoral appointment because of a unique skill set associated with church turnaround efforts. Pastor B admits,

> I wasn't aware of the ideas of church revitalization or of church growth because my background when I came. I didn't come in here thinking, all right this is a turnaround church. I came in thinking, 'Well it's a small-town church. And let's see where the Lord can take this.

None of the participating pastors in this study possessed experience as a lead pastor. None of the pastors had formal seminary training before accepting the appointment as pastor. Pastors A and

B had backgrounds in business leadership and applied that training to the task of a turnaround. All participating pastors served the churches they attended in a variety of voluntary ministries before appointment as pastor.

Not having pastoral leadership experience or extensive knowledge of turnaround principles or models did not hinder the pastors' abilities to accomplish a turnaround. Instead, the lack of knowledge seemed to free these pastors to pursue a path of revitalization appropriate to their context. They did not know what to do, so they did what they knew to do and gathered people around them to make it happen. Participating pastors were leaders who honestly assessed the current situation and moved forward toward the goal of returning the church to health and growth.

Navigating crisis and change. All participating pastors met financial and cultural challenges requiring them to lead their churches through change. The pastors' leadership through the crisis served as a platform for building trust with lay leaders and church members. Lay leader B1 states,

> I really trust [Pastor B] now just as a brother to be able to go to him and know that even if he doesn't agree with me [and] even thinks I'm crazy - I mean I'm sure he thinks that sometimes—it's just it really is like a family.

Lay leader C2 spoke at length about necessary changes implemented by Pastor C to keep the church moving forward. He summarized the changes were only possible because "there is definitely a trust." This trust revealed to the pastor the willingness of most congregants to help implement changes if those changes might return the church to health and growth. Various crises also revealed those key lay leaders who helped each pastor navigate immediate changes.

Successfully navigating crisis catalyzed trust between pastors, lay leaders, and church attendees as they collaborated to find solutions to their challenges. Trust by lay leaders gave pastors the opportunity to cast a further vision for moving beyond internal crisis to outside ministry. Pastors and lay leaders worked together to bring about cultural changes in the life of the church that shifted the attention of attendees from insider focus, primarily concerned with organizational survival, to a focus on serving outside the church to influence people toward Christ. Pastors and lay leaders formed ministry programs that challenged their churches to engage positively with their local communities and influencing people toward Christ.

Growth. Growth did not come to the participating churches because of a single event, program, or ministry. The researcher asked all participants to identify a single moment when they knew the church would return to growth and health. All participants struggled to identify a single moment. Instead, they saw the turnaround of the church as a confluence of multiple moments.

All participants described a "fuzzy awareness" about the growth of the church. Lay leaders and pastors were so entrenched in the work of revitalizing the church that growth almost surprised them. Lay leaders modeled a heart for service and sacrifice to the rest of the congregation. Pastors empowered lay leaders to do ministry by providing an environment where new ideas were expected and encouraged. Pastors and lay leaders collaborated to bring ideas to reality forming a vision for active ministry. The result was more participation by attendees in ministry, more people reached for Christ, and an increase in Sunday morning worship attendance.

Theme 2: Language of turnaround experiences. The intention of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was discovery through the interrogation of texts transcribed from

interviews and artifacts supplied by pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. Using those texts, the researcher exegeted essential meanings from the participants' descriptions of the lived experience of a turnaround. During the hermeneutic process of reading, writing, and reflection, the researcher noticed a few repeated words or word groups used among participants to describe various themes of their turnaround experience. Using MAXQDA, the researcher conducted lexical searches for those keywords noticed through the hermeneutic process. The keywords are presented below in ranked order based on the usage of the word or word groups during interviews with participants.

Vision. The word *vision* appeared numerous times in the interview transcripts. The word was used by lay leader A6 to describe the supernatural experience of seeing something occur before it occurred. In this case, a church member saw a mental image of Church A's property and facilities before purchasing the land and building. Primarily, however, participants used the word *vision* to describe a picture of the church's future. The *vision*, typically cast by the pastor, then caught and carried out by the congregation in collaboration with the pastor.

Catching the *vision* meant participation in or putting support behind those activities inspired by a vision. For lay leaders, the *vision* was the pastor's domain, and they supported that vision with their work. Nevertheless, lay leaders believed they were free to help shape the pastor's vision through input and ideas about beginning new or reforming existing ministry programs. Lay leaders believed their input and ideas were vital to the pastors' *vision*. However, lay leaders also willingly submitted their input and ideas to pastors the critique and approval. In no small way, lay leaders and pastors engaged in an open dialogue concerning the formation and implementation of ministries thought to support the *vision*. Lay leader B1 described Pastor B as a "coach" who listens to ideas, helps form those ideas to fit the *vision*, and then empowers the

leader to carry out the idea. Catching pastors' *vision* sprang up from lay leaders and other

attendees who were *willing* to act on *vision.*

  Willing/Willingness. In many ways, the keywords *willing* and *willingness* relate to the

idea of *vision.* Pastor A describes himself as being *willing* to tackle problems and challenges of

all kinds "head on." He believed this attitude of tackling tough problems created trust in the

people who then became *willing* to make deep sacrifices to move the church forward. Pastor C

declared that without people *willing* to work, Church C could never have experienced a

turnaround. Pastor C also uses the word to describe the attitude of Church C to take drastic steps

(selling of existing property) to keep the church alive. Lay leaders B1 and B2 used the words

willing and *willingness* to describe Church B's attitude toward sacrifice. Those who caught the

vision of Pastor B "stepped-up" and gave their time, energy, and skills to help bring about

change even when the change brought emotional discomfort. Pastor B saw *willingness* as a

valuable leadership characteristic and determining factor for those who were asked to take on

more significant leadership roles.

  Ultimately, the words *willing* and *willingness* described the attitude of lay leaders toward

change. Lay leaders recognized action must take place if the church were to survive. Doing

nothing or resisting change for the sake of their comfort or position would not bring the church

back to health. Lay leaders were the "tip of the spear" modeling acceptance and enthusiasm for

change to the larger church body. They worked hard to carry out the pastor's *vision* and to bring

others on board. Their attitude of *willingness* created a ripple effect on the church body helping

them become *willing* to see the change in a positive light.

  Outside. The keyword *outside* was used multiple times by pastors and lay leaders in this

study and expressed in three different ways. One meaning of *outside* related to the missional

activity of the church. Lay leader A4 stated that Church A was "outside the church more than the inside of the church." The lay leader was referring to the numerous ministry activities conducted by Church A to reach people for Christ in the area they serve. While some of these ministries happened at the physical church location, the ministry intent was to attract those not a part of the church. Even ministries that functioned within the church facilities were fundamentally dependent on gathering people from *outside* the local church body.

The second meaning of *outside* described a cognitive understanding that one's interaction with community stakeholders was vital to the success of the church. How lay leaders and pastors managed relationships with those not a part of the church directly affected how the community perceived the church. Pastor A spoke of his awareness that in his rural community his behavior at restaurants, retail stores, and other public places reflected on the church. The Apostle Paul admonished believers at Colossae to "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5 NIV). Pastors and lay leaders expressed a keen sense of responsibility to act wisely to those *outside* of their local assemblies.

The third meaning of o*utside* referred to how people unconnected to the church pitched in to help with resources. Pastor C spoke of individuals and businesses not connected with the church providing financial resources for the missional activity of the church. Study participants saw a correlative reality between a good reputation with outsiders and the outsiders' willingness to participate in church-sponsored activities. The church's reputation in the community was crucial for opening opportunities to serve their communities effectively and influence people toward a relationship with Christ.

Welcoming, Friendly, Friendliness, and Personable. In the main, this group of words described the overarching concept of hospitality. Lay leader C2 correlates Pastor C's *personable*

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character with the church's *welcoming* and *friendliness* to attendee's and those *outside* the church. Lay leaders B1 and B2 describe their first experiences with Church B as *welcoming* and *friendly* despite the significant age difference between themselves and those attending Church B. Pastor B credits Church B's *friendly* and *welcoming* culture as a vital characteristic of the church's growth. Pastor A did not use these keywords specifically. However, Pastor A related his desire to create a physical environment where church attendees and guests could get to know one another. To facilitate this *vision*, Church A remodeled the expansive church foyer to accommodate a café.

Intentionality about creating a warm and welcoming environment served to build bridges between the church and its guests. Church attendees worked hard to involve themselves in the community. They spent hours building parade floats, packaging candy for Halloween events, designing promotional material, and executing outreach events. The fruit of those hours was not only garnering influence in the community but also attracting guests to Sunday morning worship. The expectation was simple: the more people who come to Sunday worship the higher the opportunity for people to receive Christ. Knowing that people from *outside* would come into their midst, pastors modeled hospitality for the congregation and encouraged them to show hospitality to all.

Prayer. *Prayer* described a source of inspiration for *vision,* as well as the proper reaction to church challenges. Lay leader A1 directly attributes their decline to a lack of corporate prayer. The lay leader asserts that when Church A began to pray together, "as a body [Church A] came alive." Prayer was the response to a need for volunteers to operate the growing number of ministries at Church A. Lay leader A1 stated, "We need[ed] van drivers, so we prayed, and people stepped-up!" Lay leader C2 pointed to *prayer* as the primary tool for resolving conflict

among volunteers at Church C. When a need arose to speak to a church attender concerning inappropriate behavior, the leaders of Church C gathered to pray, get direction from the Lord, and then act on that direction. Pastor B noted that his decision-making process began with "being in my office before the Lord in prayer with a dream notebook." As Pastor B sought the Lord in *prayer,* God gave him direction for immediate challenges and *vision* for the future of Church B. Church C saw prayer as an opportunity to impact others for Christ. Church C called on attendees to select a local police officer and then to pray for that office over one year. Prayer was a tool for influencing the local community and creating an opportunity for involvement by those who, for various reasons, could not participate in events.

The common language outlined above forms a picture of the values found in rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. *Vision* is perceived to be the domain of the pastor. He casts vision, connects leaders to the various aspects of that vision, and coaches those leaders to success. *Vision* depends on an attitude of *willingness* by church attendee's and lay leaders to meet the challenges of turnaround and make necessary changes. *Vision* and a *willingness* to change helps set the stage for turning the church from an inside focus to an *outside*. An *outside* focus results in new and culturally appropriate ministry formation, as well as, the reforming of existing ministries deemed necessary for the care of attendees and growth of the church. As attendees interacted with the *outside* community in meaningful ways, people from the *outside* begin attending Sunday worship. As such, the congregation the importance of a *welcoming/friendly* atmosphere becomes apparent. Turnaround pastors emphasize the need for *welcoming/friendliness* by leading the church to update or remodel facilities to create physical space for people to gather. Supporting these values is a belief that God is involved in the

turnaround, as such, pastors and lay leaders alike take their challenges and need to God in *prayer*.

The language of turnaround is both descriptive and prescriptive. First, the language of turnaround describes the attitude necessary to bring about the revitalization of a declining church. Proverbs 29:18a declares, "Where there is no prophetic vision the people are discouraged" (English Standard Version). Pastoral vision gives people courage to see beyond declining attendance and imagine a new and fruitful future. Clearly articulated vision challenges attendees to a higher level of commitment previously not demanded of them. The demands of the vision cause attendees to decide their level of willingness to participate in the ministries arising from the vision. Those attendees willing to work toward a better future are challenged to engage outsiders with the gospel, welcome the stranger into their midst, and express their dependency on God through prayer.

Second, the language of turnaround is prescriptive for church leaders considering revitalizing a church. Potential turnaround pastors need a vision for the future of the church. His or her vision must include a call to the church body to reach those currently outside the body of Christ, a plan for creating a hospitable church environment, and prayer. Pastors should call attendees to participate in the vision by creating avenues for open dialogue where ideas relevant to reaching others are heard and considered. By articulating vision constantly and consistently, pastors create an opportunity for church members to determine their level of personal participation. The more a pastor casts vision the better he or she discerns who is with them in fulfilling that vision. As such, potential turnaround pastors discover leaders to aid the turnaround from among those participating and sharing in his or her vision.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Critical to the exploration of the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches is a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review. The literature review examined current literature through the four lenses of the conceptual framework. The ecclesiastical lens looked at church plateau, decline, and turnaround of church congregations. The geographic and demographic lens brought clarity to the complex definitions of what rural means in the United States. The third lens explored the qualities of turnaround pastors and their effects on lay leaders. The fourth lens examined how rural congregations set leadership priorities that promoted turnaround.

Church plateau, decline, and turnaround. Ross (2014) asserted that churches, in general, begin with a dream and then die within fifty years. The literature revealed that 65% to 80% of churches in the United States are plateaued or declining in Sunday worship attendance (Rainer, 2017; Stetzer, 2007). Rural church attendance dropped nearly 12% between 1998 and 2012 (Cromartie, 2017). The Assembly of God reported that 70% of its churches experienced plateau or decline (S. Doty, personal communication, July 27, 2018). Various church organizations measure and define church plateau and decline differently. However, most agree that a -2.5% change in worship attendance over a five to ten-year period constitutes decline (Clarensau, 2017; Costner, 2011; Dodson, 2017; Martin, 2015; Penfold, 2011). Conversely, a 2.5% increase in Sunday worship attendance over a five to 10-year period constitutes turnaround (Costner, 2011; Dodson, 2017; Martin, 2015; Penfold, 2011). Church plateau, decline, and turnaround are also measured qualitatively. Terms such as "lost momentum and steep decline" (Mays, 2011), and "survival" (Ross, 2013) are commonly used to explain what pastors observed about their churches.

Pastors in this study knew they accepted the pastorates of declining churches. The involvement of denominational leadership in their appointment as pastor confirmed the participating church's need for help. Lay leaders observed a dwindling attendance at Sunday worship and intuitively understood strong leadership was needed to revitalize the church. Lay leaders spoke of a lack of finances to meet obligations and do required maintenance before the pastoral appointment. A general lack of enthusiasm about the future of the church and its ability to sustain God's mission permeated the culture of participating churches. Despite tremendous leadership, financial, spiritual, and cultural challenges lay leaders in this study chose to stay and help find solutions.

Similarly, pastors and lay leaders described the nature of their turnaround experience qualitatively. Pastors in this study knew the size of the congregation at their appointment and could quickly relate the current church size in numbers. However, lay leaders never showed the same awareness of exact attendance numbers. Instead, lay leaders spoke in ranges of numbers but instinctively knew more people sat in the pews on Sunday and served in church programs. Pastors in this study are all licensed with the Assemblies of God. As such, they are accustomed to describing church metrics quantitatively through the Annual Church Ministry Report (ACMR). The ACMR is a tool used by the Assembly of God to gather information from its churches about demographics, attendance, finances, ministry programming, the number of conversions and baptisms, and more each year. Completing the ACMR provides a quantitative snapshot of growth or decline. Pastors also know the power of story to help describe the growth or decline of the church.

Denominational leadership must necessarily gather and disseminate quantitative data to its stakeholders. Pastors of local churches also provide quantitative data about attendance,

finance, and conversions to their members each year. However, pastors are rooted in the lives of church attendees and the life of their communities. Consequently, they learn to tell the stories of conversion, the provision of God that helped them accomplish a ministry goal, or the feelings of watching their churches participating in local community events. Rural churches minister to a mostly blue-collar constituency. Pastor B explained that Church B did not respond to "MBA type presentations." Instead, they merely wanted to know that God had spoken to Pastor B and they trusted him to lead them forward. The phenomenon of church turnaround can never solely revolve around quantitative percentages of decrease and increase. Creating a culture of change that leads to health and sustainability depends on the stories of changed hearts, changed attitudes, changed focus, and changed communities.

Defining rural in the United States. This study defined rural as "all population[s], housing, and territory not included within an urbanized area or urban cluster" (Ratcliffe, et al., 2016). Missouri has 114 counties, and 101 of those counties are considered rural (Van Dyne, et al., 2017). Nearly 1/3rd of Missourians live in rural locations (Van Dyne, et al., 2017) but between 2005 and 2015 over half (51) of Missouri's 114 counties experienced population decline.

The researcher interviewed pastors and lay leaders of churches in communities ranging in population from 200 to 18,000. None of the communities represented in this study were closer than 100 miles to an urbanized area. Nevertheless, churches were negatively affected by an out-migration of young adults seeking employment and educational opportunities in urbanized areas. Population decline and out-migration of young adults leave rural counties and communities without political representation or the tax base necessary to support social services. As such, rural communities plagued by alcoholism and drug addiction lack services to deal with the

problem. The *2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (2016) reports that 37.8% of

youths age 12–20 in non-metro areas use alcohol. The study also reports that 14.2% of children

in non-metro areas use illicit drugs and 11.2% use marijuana. *The 2018 Report on Missouri*

Poverty Report (2018) indicates that rural areas in Missouri have limited access to healthcare.

Turnaround churches in rural communities must form ministries to fill the social services

and healthcare gap. Church A is an example of how lay leaders both saw and acted upon the

problem of alcoholism and drug addiction within their rural community. Initially, Lay leader A4

began a ministry that dealt directly with substance abuse issues. However, as that ministry

blossomed, other lay leaders recognized other issues were driving addictive behavior. These lay

leaders worked with Pastor A and lay leader A4 to form a ministry that helps people struggling

with other life issue fueling addiction, such as, financial management.

Furthermore, engagement with those in the community having substance abuse and other

life controlling issues has led to a burgeoning children's ministry. Adults participating in the

recovery programs are urged to bring their children. Children participate in age-appropriate

activities and interact with church staff and volunteers. It is interesting to note that of all

churches participating in the study, Church A has the highest percentage of growth (900%) in the

shortest amount of time (5 years). Lay leaders and ministers involved themselves in the

messiness of the human condition believing the gospel could transform lives. Doing this not

only brought about personal transformation but it also transformed a church.

Qualities of turnaround pastors. Russell (2014) asserts that rural churches require

"intentional intervention and transformational change" to accomplish a turnaround (p. 36). This

study looks at leadership through the lens of transformational leadership. The literature describes

transformational leaders as those who focus on achieving mutually shared goals above their self-

interests. Transformational leaders are vision casters who influence followers to share in their

vision through creativity and innovation. Transformational leadership contains four concepts:

idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized concern

(Bass & Riggio, 2006). Bass (1999) studied Methodist ministers and concluded that a

correlation exists between pastors who perceived as transformational and "high church

attendance among congregants and growth in church membership" (p. 22). Table 5 below shows

the transformational characteristics of turnaround pastors found in the literature.

Table 5

Transformational Qualities of Turnaround Pastors

Quality	Literature Reference
Communicates God-given vision	Bass, 1985; Crandall, 1995; Hughes, 2014; Lamb, 2016; Martin, 2015; Page, 2008; Penn, 2011; Penfold, 2011; Scuderi, 2010
Leads by example	Crandall, 1995; Nixon, 2004; Rainer, 2001
Willingness to pay the price for change	Lamb, 2016; McEachin, 2011; Penfold, 2011; Stroh, 2014
Commitment to stay at church	Ross, 2013; Martin, 2015
Enables members to see the need for change	Lamb, 2016; Michaelis, Stegmaier, & Sonntag, 2008; Stroh, 2014
The optimistic and faith-filled belief that the dying church can live	Frazee, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Mays, 2011; Rainer, 2001
Loves people helping them discover and develop gifts	Crandall, 1995; Nixon, 2004; Penfold, 2011; Rainer & Lawless, 2003
Preaching/Communication skills	Crandall, 1995; Penfold, 2011
Personal faith and love for God	Crandall, 1995; Rainer, 2001
Willing to confront others in love	Lamb, 2016; Penfold, 2011; Wood, 2001

Through the hermeneutic process, the researcher discovered six characteristics of participating pastors that emerged from the data. Identifying the following pastoral characteristics serves two purposes. First, they help form a rubric through which denominational leaders can assess pastoral candidates considering leading declining churches. Second, these characteristics provide an evaluative tool for self-assessment by pastors considering an opportunity to lead a dying church to health and growth. Many, but not all, qualities described in the literature were present in the pastors and lay leaders accounts of their church turnaround experience.

Turnaround pastors led by example. The turnaround of the participating churches required sacrifice by all involved. The pastors in this study modeled a life of sacrifice that inspired their lay leaders and attendees to do the same. The turnaround pastors in this study were willing to pay a steep price for change (Lamb, 2016; McEachin, 2011; Penfold, 2011; Stroh, 2014). "Turnaround is fairly rare, and that's probably because it is often costly" (Stroh, 2014, p. 138). The act of accepting the pastorate of a dying church is itself sacrificial. Pastor A received no remuneration for his work for three years while driving over 400 miles to the church each weekend. Pastor B received a salary from the church. However, that salary was insufficient to care adequately for him and his wife. Pastor C recognized the church finances were insufficient to continue paying him while trying to pay for a building in disuse.

The pastors in this study also led as examples of faith. They optimistically believed their dying congregations could once again become a thriving and vibrant part of their communities (Frazee, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Mays, 2011; Rainer, 2001). They put faith in lay leaders allowing them to form and re-form ministries to reach others for Christ. They challenged church attendees to try things previously not tried in their churches (Lamb, 2016; Michaelis, Stegmaier,

& Sonntag, 2008; Stroh, 2014). Church A launched a successful recovery ministry to meet the

challenges of alcoholism and drug addiction in their small community. Church B saw an

opportunity to help public school students learn basic life skills and to minister to single mothers

in need of a helping hand. Church C reached out to first responders in the county offering

spiritual care for them and their families. Though the examples above do not formulate an

exhaustive list of the new outreaches, the examples above demonstrate how the faith of the

pastor in the people inspired new ways of reaching new people for Christ.

   Turnaround pastors showed transparency about church problems. Repeatedly, pastors

in this study stood before their congregations to explain challenges with banks, why some bills

remained unpaid, why long-standing ministries needed examination for effectiveness and a host

of other challenges to the sustainability of their churches. These pastors withstood the emotional

pain of taking on problems they had no hand in creating (Ross, 2013). However, the pastors

never laid the blame for the challenges at the feet of previous pastors or the lay leaders. Instead,

they owned the problems, spoke honestly about the issues, and refused to be defeated. More

importantly, the pastors always asked lay leaders and church attendees to take ownership of the

problems and help find solutions. Taking ownership led to church attendees generously offering

to pay overdue bills, others giving their time and talent to do projects to save money, and others

getting involved in ministry endeavors. Transparency with church attendee's and lay leaders

about church problems helped them grasp how much help the church required to stay viable, and

people responded positively.

   Turnaround pastors established new expectations of attendees through vision. Pastors

in this study inherited multiple problems upon accepting their appointment. Church buildings

were often in disrepair and need of long-overdue maintenance. Church C was on the brink of

losing their building because of declining attendance and finances. Church A had overbuilt in good years, but in decline, the building became a financial drain on the small congregation. Chaotic behavior during church services disguised a spirituality turned newcomers away. A belief that planning was unspiritual and would hinder God's ability to work in the church permeated the culture of Church A. Financial problems, moral failures among previous pastors, and a general belief that rural churches cannot attract quality pastors, created low expectations in the participating churches.

New expectations came out of new vision cast by the pastor. Each pastor clearly articulated their vision to the researcher and lay leaders were clear about the church's vision during the interviews. Vision became the foundation for church culture and strategy for reaching others for Christ. All pastors believed the vision for their church was God-given and biblically accurate (Bass, 1985; Crandall, 1995; Hughes, 2014; Lamb, 2016; Martin, 2015; Page, 2008; Penn, 2011; Penfold, 2011; Scuderi, 2010). Therefore, participating pastors believe God would provide the resources necessary to accomplish "His" vision. Turnaround pastors acted in faith and challenged lay leaders and church attendees to do the same.

Based on vision, all pastors in this study established a new expectation of meaningful involvement in their communities. Ministry no longer focused on existing members exclusively. Instead, each church actively entered its community and intentionally sought out ways to help. New expectations also meant some challenges from attendees who did not believe in the need for change. The pastors in this study confronted those who caused dissension or division in a loving but resolute manner (Lamb, 2016; Penfold, 2011; Wood, 2001). The vision for a healthy and vibrant church would not be derailed by those who refused to change. Any confrontation was not intended as punitive but corrective and to allow the opportunity for reflection. The three

pastors in this study proudly proclaimed that most of the original congregational members remained members of the church.

Vision cast by the pastor led to new expectations for attendees which led to taking purposeful actions by the church. Deteriorating church facilities were remodeled not merely for aesthetic purposes, but to set an expectation of warm hospitality and as a sign of good stewardship. Based on the expectations above, they should then expect to see new people from the community attend Sunday worship. As such, the church facilities must demonstrate to those guests an environment of care and welcome. New expectations about financial management helped give church attendees a feeling of security about the future. Furthermore, sound financial management set a new expectation in the community that the church would honor its obligations.

Turnaround pastors appealed to a higher cause when casting a vision for change.
Change for the sake of change is an enemy of leadership. Change must connect to a reason if people support it. Turnaround pastors in this study were adept at connecting the changes they knew must occur to a higher cause. A change in focus from inside ministry to outside was often connected to an appeal to remember those lost without Christ. The pastors challenged their churches to think about the awesomeness of people "getting saved" (a colloquialism for someone coming into relationship with Christ) at our altars. Because many attendees at Church B were elderly, Pastor B connected launching a previously non-existent children's ministry by pointing to the hope it would bring to future generations who would carry on the work of the church. Giving generously to global missions relied on the connection to reaching out to the local community. The connection between the need for change and God's integrity, a good name for the church, and the glory of God helped attendees see a bigger picture of the work of God in their communities.

Appealing to a higher cause ultimately helped each pastor explain the "why" of some change. It pushed down the idea that the pastor was making change for the sake of change or trying somehow to make the church do something it did not want to do. Connecting change with a higher cause gave the participating churches a sense of legacy. In other words, they saw the change as an opportunity to create a church to serve another upcoming generation.

Turnaround pastors used crises to build trust with followers. Each of the participating churches faced significant crises. However, these crises were crucial to establishing trust between the pastor, lay leaders, and church attendees. Each pastor faced a major crisis early in his appointment as Senior Pastor. The timing of these crises at each participating church seemed providential. Attendees at declining churches often felt hopeless to change their situation. People were leaving, finances were dropping, ministry programs are faltering, and worship often lacked energy and vibrancy. Turnaround pastors in this study met these enormous challenges to the viability of the church head-on.

These crises also created an opportunity for the pastors to demonstrate strong leadership. Acting in faith and trust in God, firm decisions making, and confronting problems head-on showed church attendees that the pastor could lead them to sustainability. Pastors in this study did not walk away from the challenges these crises brought. Instead, they committed to staying and walking with the people of the church through difficult and potentially catastrophic problems.

Turnaround pastors prioritized relationship building. The priority all pastors placed on relationship building showed up in a variety of ways. First, participating pastors went to great lengths to create physical spaces in the church building to accommodate human interaction. Because of growth, Church B moved from a small church building where the foyer acted like a

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"cattle chute." A cattle chute uses metal fencing to create a narrow opening for cattle moving from one area to another or onto a vehicle. The chute only allows for cattle to move in a single line formation to allow the farmer to efficiently control, count, and vaccinate animals as they move through the opening. The design of Church B's foyer was narrow and designed for efficiently moving people into the sanctuary and then out to the parking lot. It was not designed to facilitate conversation or fellowship. When Church B purchased a new building, they set aside enormous space for people to "hang out" and drink coffee.

Church A tore out walls to expand their foyer making space for a café. The café has become a place where people meet after church to share in each other's lives. Pastor A believes that the distance between people in rural communities causes isolation. As such, the church can play a vital role in helping to bring people together who live far apart. Physical space, however, was only one part of the relationship priority.

The pastors in this study identified potential leaders through relationships. Often relationships were built as lay leaders, church attendee's, and the pastor worked on large and small projects. Other times relationships developed between pastor and attendee by taking long truck rides and engaging in conversation. While working on a project at the church, or through conversation in the car, pastors began to recognize individual gifts and learn areas of interest to the attendee. As the need for ministry volunteers and leaders arose, the pastors were able to connect attendee's based on gifting and interests and avoid simply filling a vacancy (Crandall, 1995; Nixon, 2004; Penfold, 2011; Rainer & Lawless, 2003). None of the churches in this study relied on formal gifts assessments to determine ministry placement. Instead, the pastors relied upon knowing people and then asking people to serve in places they believed were good for

them. Then the pastors encouraged ministry leaders to build strong relationships with those serving with them.

The researcher began this study with an assumption that turnaround pastors are transformational leaders. The qualities delineated above confirm the researcher's assumption. Their leadership demonstrated the four components of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized concern (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By clearly articulating a God-given vision, the turnaround pastor portrayed a hopeful and optimistic future. They motivated followers by connecting their gifts and interests to the vision in meaningful ways. This action helped followers see how they were positively contributing to the fulfillment of the vision. Turnaround pastors led followers as exemplars of the vision they were casting. Pastors in this study made room for individual followers to use their creativity to develop new ministries to reach others for Christ. Finally, turnaround pastors paid attention to the individuals offering suggestions and plans for new endeavors and solutions. Acting as a coach, the turnaround pastor helped the follower to successfully design and implement ministries and programs in the church and community.

Follower effects of turnaround pastors on lay leaders. The type of leadership employed by the participating pastors affected followers. Transformational leadership produces four consistent follower effects: admiration, loyalty, trust, and respect (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Conger, et al. (2000) assert that an attitudinal change occurs when followers perceive leaders as transformational. Bjorn, et al. (2010) link transformational leadership with an increased commitment to change by followers. Ultimately, followers come to trust leaders perceived as transformational and then achieve at higher than expected levels (Conger, et al., 2000; Podsakof,

et al., 1990). Three follower-effects of lay leaders became evident as the researcher exegeted the data.

Lay leaders felt empowered to minister. Lay leaders participating in this study overwhelming believed they were free to create ministry and carry it out. Lay leaders held to the idea they could bring ideas to the pastor without being rebuffed because they trusted the pastor. Few things make someone feel more vulnerable than presenting an idea to a superior. Because Assemblies of God churches lean toward a culture where the pastor is the primary visionary, church members are often reticent to offer up new ideas for fear of rejection. That was not the case in the church participating in this study. Lay leaders brought ideas to the pastor and fully expected those ideas to be validated. However, they also submitted those ideas to the authority of the pastor and to his perception of how the idea would fit into the broader vision of the church.

Lay leaders trusted pastors to coach them to success. Lay leader B1 described Pastor B as a "coach" who listens to ideas, helps form those ideas to fit the vision, and then empowers the leader to carry out the idea. The lay leader team at Church A spoke of Pastor A as someone who listened to their ideas but also as someone who helped shape those ideas through dialogue. Lay leaders felt they could dream about the future of their church along with their pastor. That sense of belonging gave them ownership of the vision. Ownership of the vision empowered lay leaders to seek God, notice ministry opportunities in the community, and believe their contribution to the vision mattered.

Lay leaders sacrificed time and energy because of belief in the pastoral vision. Lay leaders in turnaround churches gave inordinate amounts of volunteer time to their church. Some lay leaders spent more than 70 hours per week working on remodeling projects. Other lay leaders sacrifice two to three evening every week to serve children and adults involved in church

ministries. Lay leaders followed the example of their pastor who worked alongside them to plan and execute outreach events in the community. The sacrifices of lay leaders and volunteers are vital to the turnaround of the church and the value of their time they have invested and the money they have saved the church is hard to measure. However, as lay leaders caught the pastoral vision, they took it too heart and were willing to go above and beyond to make that vision happen.

     Lay leaders developed a deep trust in their pastors. Over time and through experience lay leaders began naturally to believe their pastors would do what was right for the church. Lay leaders in this study were quick to adopt the pastor's vision of change. Working in partnership with their pastor to manage the crisis, implement change, and celebrate even the smallest of victories created a powerful bond of trust. Lay leaders trust in their pastors spilled over into the lives of other church attendee's.

     Rural church leadership. Costner (2017) defines a high-capacity lay leader as someone who, "[understands' their God-given purpose and calling, [has] a mindset of growth, [possesses] servant's heart, and desire[s] to multiply and grow the body of Christ" (pp. 133–134). This study confirms Costner's characteristics were present in the lay leaders interviewed for this study. Lay leaders believed their contributions played a vital role in their church returning to health. They felt as if the turnaround pastor was not only a spiritual leader in their lives but also a friend. The lay leaders showed due respect and deference to the pastor as a leader, but they felt like they were part of a team that was making an impact on their communities. None of the lay leaders interviewed are employees of the church. Instead, they volunteer their time because they want their church to grow and they want to see the gospel spread around the world. Turnaround pastors and lay leaders worked together to bring vision to reality.

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Limitations

The primary limitation to this study was the number of participating pastors and lay leaders of turnaround churches. The study explored the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. However, the number of participants limited the scope of the study to the experiences of a small group.

The researcher carefully examined the phenomenon of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches through the conceptual framework guiding this study. In retrospect, the researcher believes he should have asked participating churches to provide access to their ACMR data for the last 10 years. The ACMR is a tool used by the Assembly of God to gather information from its churches about demographics, attendance, finances, ministry programming, the number of conversions and baptisms, and more. Nevertheless, the participating rural Assembly of God pastors and lay leaders confirmed the qualitative characteristics found in the literature as they verbally described their turnaround experience.

The researcher scrutinized the data to extract embedded themes, sub-themes, and keywords that describe in detail the lived experiences of participants. The researcher assumed that participants were answering questions to the best of their knowledge and with truthfulness. However, the reliability of the findings was dependent on the honesty and accuracy of participant answers to interview questions.

Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

Rural churches continue to decline and teeter on the brink of closing; as such, the need for turnaround pastors who can develop effective lay leaders rises. Much of the literature points to a need for healthy pastoral and lay leader relationships. McEachin (2011) maintains that a pastor cannot successfully carry out God's mission without the help of lay leaders. Even the

most capable of pastoral leaders requires the assistance of lay leaders to help revitalize a declining church (Penfold, 2011). Bass (1999) asserts that pastors who practice transformational leadership are best suited to grow a church.

This study examined church turnaround through the broad ecclesiastical lens of church plateau, decline, and turnaround in the United States. The results of this study reveal the need to equip church leaders to assess their congregation's health. The study established that denominational or church network leaders are vital to assessing the leadership capabilities of pastors chosen to lead plateauing and declining churches. In the Assembly of God, denominational leaders are frequently called upon to appoint pastors for plateauing and declining churches.

In this study, three pastors were selected by Assembly of God district officials to lead rural congregations on the edge of failure. The relationship between potential pastor and denominational official acted as an assessment tool for choosing these leaders. Dialogue with district officials helped denominational officials uncover leadership capabilities pertinent to the work of turnaround. However, as more and more rural churches teeter on the edge of closing, denominational and church network leaders might consider adding a psychometric assessment to measure the leadership qualities of potential turnaround pastors.

By exploring the concept of rural in the United States through the lens demographics and geographic realities, this study confirmed rural turnaround churches inserted themselves into the social needs within the community. Sixteen percent of adults and 23% of children in rural Missouri communities live below the poverty line. A lack of financial resources makes it difficult for families to enjoy social activities. Turnaround churches in this study developed or partnered with other organizations to create social events for their communities. These events

provided a safe place for children and families to participate at little to no cost. The events provided an avenue for church members to serve their neighbors. Two-thirds of rural communities have no access to mental health services ("Rural Matters," 2017). Some congregations in this study created ministries to serve those struggling with life-controlling issues and addiction. Rural turnaround pastors positively engaged social issues in the community by challenging their congregations to engage with people outside of Sunday worship.

The third lens of the conceptual framework looked at qualities of turnaround pastors and effects on lay leaders. The results of this study confirm that rural turnaround pastors demonstrate the qualities of transformational leaders and have positive effects on lay leaders. Turnaround pastors lead by example, show transparency about church problems, establish new expectations of attendees through vision, appeal to a higher cause to bring about change, and build trusting relationships with followers. Successful turnaround pastors cast a clear vision for prayer, outreach, and hospitality. He or she must have the help of a capable and willing laity (Penfold, 2011). Consequently, turnaround pastors invite attendees to share in the vision through input and participation.

Additionally, the results of this study indicate that a well-articulated vision draws attendees to participate in the vision. Eventually, some of those participants become key lay leaders. This study confirms that lay leaders participating in the pastor's vision feel empowered to minister, trust their pastor to coach them to success in ministry and give sacrificially of their time and energy to fulfill the pastor's vision. Denominations and church networks tasked with revitalizing dying rural churches must recognize the need to recruit and train men and women who exhibit transformational leadership qualities to lead revitalization efforts in rural communities.

The results of this study do not indicate that a plateauing or declining church requires a formal revitalization program. The results indicate that when a transformational leader is present the declining or plateauing church can navigate successfully back to health and vitality. Martin (2015) contends that the relationship between turnaround pastor and laity built on clear vision brings more success than a revitalization program. None of the participating churches in this study attended a revitalization seminar, workshop, or conference. The participating pastors had no experience as a lead pastoral, and none possessed knowledge about church revitalization methods or models. Each pastor in this study demonstrated transformational leadership qualities that positively affected those they led.

The fourth lens of this study explored rural church turnaround by examining the leadership priorities of pastors and lay leaders. Overwhelmingly the first leadership priority for turnaround pastors was cultivating relationships with church attendees and community stakeholders. Change initiatives and crisis management were made possible through the development of strong relationships with church leaders. Opportunities for involvement in community initiatives and events came about as the turnaround pastor developed relationships with stakeholders. This study establishes that rural turnaround pastors are adept at and intentional about relationship building. Turnaround pastors build bridges between the mission of the church and the community they serve. Potential pastors of churches needing turnaround must be leaders who make the deliberate choice to spend time with people within and without the church body.

Recommendations for Further Research

Those who choose to study the phenomenon of rural church turnaround might consider the following recommendations. First, a longitudinal study of turnaround churches would help

shed light on the sustainability of the turnaround. Churches have a typical life cycle leading from birth to death. Following turnaround churches for an extended period might provide an understanding of whether revitalized churches follow a similar life cycle. The second recommendation is related to the first. Following turnaround churches for a more extended period might also give insight into what happens when a turnaround pastor chooses to leave the church he or she led to the turnaround. Does the turnaround church continue with healthy patterns or does it revert to unhealthy patterns and begin declining? Third, it may also prove helpful to explore the lived experiences of churches unable to accomplish turnaround then compare the pastoral and lay leadership dynamics of those churches with turnaround churches. A study of this nature could help pastors, and denominational leaders learn two things: how to help churches close with dignity and discern whether a church should attempt a turnaround. Fourth, a phenomenological study of rural out-migration of church members and their experiences integrating into an urban setting could be helpful. Urban pastors might benefit from knowing how rural people perceive the church and church leadership to shepherd the church better. Last, a quantitative study utilizing the Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) to measure and compare where turnaround and non-turnaround pastor's placement on the full-range leadership model.

Conclusion

A hermeneutic phenomenological method was used to explore the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assembly of God turnaround churches. This study provided an avenue through which pastors and lay leaders could express their joys and challenges of leading a turnaround. Together participants spoke clearly of their love for their communities, their churches, and of the people who populated both. Pastors and lay leaders

articulated well their perceptions of leading a group of people from discouraged Sunday worshipers to encouraged community ministers.

Participating pastors and lay leaders recognized the challenges of doing ministry in rural areas. Great distances separated church attendees geographically making it difficult to create community among attendees. Drug and alcohol addiction ravaging their communities became the concern of pastors and created ministry opportunities for lay leaders. A lack of social services to help those in need sparked ideas in lay leaders for ministry. Culturally an acceptance of low expectations of people and programs was challenged by a fresh vision for excellence in ministry. Pastors and lay leaders did not speak of these challenges with disdain or hopelessness. Instead, they creatively found ways to bridge the distances, serve the addicted, fill the social services gap, and set new expectations of themselves and community members. Three pastors and 10 lay leaders told a compelling story of God's grace and desire to see dead churches in forgotten places live again.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thank you so much for agreeing to speak to me today. My name is Danny Davis and I will be conducting this interview. The goal of this project is to explore your experiences of having helped lead CHURCH NAME from decline to growth, what is commonly called turnaround or revitalization. I am a pastor and have helped lead my church to a turnaround, your thoughts, insights, and opinions are crucial to helping us understand the experiences of PASTORS/LAY LEADERS [choose one depending on who is being interviewed] who have led their church to a turnaround. You have been selected because of your experience and successes of leading CHURCH NAME to a turnaround. A total of 18 pastors and lay leaders from rural Assembly of God churches in Missouri will be interviewed. Ultimately, the research may help empower other rural churches to know what to expect when they decide to lead their declining churches to a turnaround.

Because what you have to say about your experience is valuable, I would like to audio tape our conversations today. Just so you know, I am the only one who will have access to these recordings. Eventually all of these recordings will be destroyed after being transcribed. Also, you must sign a consent form that was provided to you before this meeting. Basically, the consent form states that: (1) all information will be confidential, (2) participating in the interview is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the consent form or anything I have stated?

At this time, please state your verbal consent to participating in the interviews today, that I have provided you with a consent form, and that I have answered to your satisfaction all questions about the consent form.

This interview will last no longer than 90-minutes. If we begin to run short on time, I may interrupt you or ask you to summarize your comments. Do you have any other questions for me at this time? (If yes, interviewer will answer questions. If no, interviewer will begin interviews.)

Interview Questions

The following questions are meant to spark conversation, other probing questions may arise based on comments from the participants. Pastors and lay leaders are interviewed separately, therefore, some questions are specific to their role.

1. Tell me, as best you can, the history of this congregation.

2. Tell me what your role or roles have been in the church (lay leaders)

3. Describe your role as a pastor/lay leader in this church.

4. How did you come to the conclusion that the church was plateauing or declining?

5. What personal emotions did you notice upon realizing the church was in decline?

6. What do you believe were the causes of the churches plateau or decline?

7. Did you utilize a formal church revitalization program? If so, describe your experience.

8. Was there a moment or event that caused you to realize that changes had to be made for the church to survive?

9. What was it like to lead your church to turnaround?

10. What do you believe were the greatest challenges faced in the turnaround?

11. How would you describe your relationship with the pastor during the turnaround?

12. How would you describe your relationship with lay leaders during the turnaround?

13. Describe your initial thoughts about being a part of leading the church to a turnaround?

14. Describe the congregations attitude concerning the problem of plateau or decline.

15. How were decisions about change made?

16. Describe your decision-making process?

17. How did you set change the priorities of change?

18. How did the leadership team communicate change?

19. How did the leadership team manage congregational conflict?

20. How was conflict managed inside the leadership team?

21. Describe your relationship with lay leaders today?

22. Describe your relationship with the pastor today?

23. What would you do differently? Why?

Conclusion

Is there anything you would like me to explain?

I will return soon to meet with you again. The aim of that meeting is to make sure I have clearly understood your statements today. Your input into this study will greatly help other rural pastors and lay leaders give their communities a life-giving church. Thank you for your help.

NOTE: *Second interview questions are specifically generated from the initial interview and are for the purpose of clarification or expansion of a discovered theme.*

Appendix B: Informed Consent

A phenomenological study of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches that were in plateau or decline but experienced a turnaround and to describe the dyadic relationship between pastors and lay leaders of turnaround churches in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches.

Danny W. Davis Ed.D., Candidate

Concordia University

Education Department

You are invited to participate in a research study of pastors and lay leaders in rural Missouri Assembly of God churches that were in plateau or decline but experienced a turnaround. You are invited to describe, as best you can and in your own words, the relationship between the pastor and lay leaders of your church as you led it to a turnaround.

You were selected as a possible participant because your church was formerly in plateau or decline but has experienced a turnaround. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is conducted by Danny W. Davis, Ed.D. Candidate at Concordia University

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to gather information related to the experiences of pastors and lay leaders of churches formerly in decline or plateau but successfully turned around (revitalized). The researcher is exploring what it means to lead a declining or plateauing rural Missouri

Assembly of God church to turnaround. To accomplish this goal, the researcher gathers, examines, and describes pastors and lay leaders knowledge, beliefs, and actions that led to church turnaround.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

1. Take part in two separate interviews either in person or using phone or video conferencing technology. Pastors are interviewed separately from the lay leaders chosen to participate in this study. The interviews are approximately 90 minutes in duration. Interviews are not highly structured, but a list of prompt questions is provided to participants before interviews. All interviews will be electronically recorded and transcribed so that all parties can review their responses for accuracy and make corrections.

2. Provide written feedback of the researcher's descriptions of participants experiences of leading church turnaround.

3. (Optional) Provide various artifacts to the researcher that represent your turnaround experience, such as, sermon notes, video or audio of sermons, church bulletins, church business meetings, mission and vision statements, and notes taken while attending a formal church revitalization program.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

Participants should be aware this study has both risk and benefit.

Risk

You may be asked to share personal or confidential information about your experiences. You may, at times, feel uncomfortable talking about some topic. You do not have to answer any

question or take part in the interviews if you believe the questions are too personal or make you uncomfortable.

Benefit

There is no direct benefit to you, but your participation in this study is likely to help other churches, denominations, parachurch ministries, and networks understand what it means to experience church turnaround in the rural Missouri Assembly of God church.

Confidentiality

All records of this study will be kept confidential. Any published report arising from this study does not include information making it possible to identify its participants. Only the researcher has access to securely stored records. All electronic recordings are stored utilizing an external hard drive. All hard copy data collected is stored in a locked cabinet located in the researcher's office. Destruction of electronic and hard copy data occurs after seven years.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish; choosing not to participate does not affect your relationship with the church you are representing. You may stop participating in the interviews any time you wish without repercussion. You are afforded an opportunity at the end of the interview, review your remarks, and you may ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Danny Wade Davis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact Danny at [retracted. The Doctoral Chair of this research is Dr. William Boozang, bboozang@cu-portland.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board at Concordia University–Portland.

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

Statement of Consent

Participant

I have read the preceding information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it, and any questions I have been asked were answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Printed Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Statement of Confirmation by the Researcher.

I, Danny W. Davis, confirm the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. I confirm that I have been provided a copy of this Informed Consent Form to the participant

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Data Cluster Labeling for Anonymity

The population of this study consists of three data clusters. Each cluster contains a pastor and a minimum of two to three lay leaders from churches who hold a historical and orthodox view of Christianity. These leaders must also have worked together to bring about rural Missouri Assembly of God church to turnaround. In total, the study comprises 9-12 subjects at three church sites (Creswell, 1998). An example of how churches and participants will be labeled for privacy is shown below.

Church A	Pastor A	Lay leader A1
Church B	Pastor B	Lay leader B1
Church C	Pastor C	Lay leader C1

Appendix D: Facilities Permission Form

Dear Pastor A, B, or C,

      As a Doctoral student at Concordia University, I am conducting research to better understand the lived experiences of pastors and lay leaders of rural Missouri Assemblies of God whose churches were plateaued or declining but were revitalized. The title of my research project is "The Lived Experiences of Rural Missouri Assemblies of God Turnaround Churches." The purpose of my research is to understand how pastors and lay leaders worked together to bring their churches from decline to growth.

      I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your church and invite them to participate in my research study.

      Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please sign and send this document to Danny Davis by email (retracted).

Sincerely,

Danny W. Davis
Doctoral Student

Appendix E: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.
As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does "fraudulent" mean?
"Fraudulent" work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one's own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate's final work without full and complete documentation.

What is "unauthorized" assistance?

"Unauthorized assistance" refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:
- Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association

_____

Digital Signature

Danny W. Davis

_____

Name (Typed)

April 12, 2019

_____

Date