PART 1: THE MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

THE ILLINOIS GREAT RIVERS CONFERENCE MINISTRY CONTEXT

Demographics of the Ministry Context

The Illinois Great Rivers Conference lives within a demographic context of three and a

half million people dwelling in the southern two-thirds of the state of Illinois. The basic

migration patterns westward were over the Great Lakes to Chicago and through the Cumberland

Gap in Tennessee. The latter explains a significant Southern cultural influence in downstate

Illinois.[1]

While largely rural, there are three urban areas. Two straddle the Mississippi river, the

Quad Cities[2] to the north and the Illinois suburbs of St. Louis to the south. The third

Metropolitan Statistical Area consists of five cities of 100,000 or more arranged in a triangle in

the center of the state (Peoria, Springfield, Decatur, Champaign-Urbana, Bloomington-Normal).

Population is increasing along the interstates that connect these cities due to commerce and

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[1]Abraham Lincoln's family migrated to Illinois through Tennessee, then Kentucky and southern Indiana to finally settle at New Salem northwest of Springfield. The Southern influence is not aristocratic but largely one of rural poverty. Harold Henderson discusses the conflicts of blending three cultural groups in Illinois, which he terms "upland Southerners, Midlanders and Yankees." Harold Henderson, "Who We Are," *Illinois Issues: A Publication of the University of Illinois at Springfield* 24, no. 5 (May 1998), under http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/1998/ii980512.html(accessed June 18, 2007). Cf. Gregory Rodriguez, "Where the Two Americas Collide," *Los Angeles Times,* October 1, 2006, under http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2006/where_the_two_americas_collide (accessed June 18, 2007).

[2]The four historic "Quad" cities are Moline, East Moline and Rock Island, Illinois, plus Davenport, Iowa.

commuting.[3] Towns flourished in a post civil war manufacturing boom. Many factories later closed or relocated as founding families gradually sold out to conglomerates. Large manufacturers such as Caterpillar Tractor in Peoria allow people to work urban and live rural, preserving small town population levels, schools and economies.[4] Labor intensive industries such as plant nursery and pork slaughtering draw a growing Hispanic immigration to rural areas to fill a need for labor.[5]

The Illinois Great Rivers Conference approved an ambitious "Comprehensive Plan for Church Growth and Development" as a new century began in 2000.[6] In 1998, the Illinois Great Rivers Conference had an average weekly total attendance of 83,469 in 992 churches; in 2006, average weekly worship attendance was 74,431 in 899 churches served by 463 full-time clergy and a growing number of part-time pastors. The plan calls for an expenditure of $12,175,000 over ten years in order to start thirty new churches and revitalize many existing churches.

Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher articulated the challenge presented by current reality in 2005 to the Conference:

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[3]A new interstate highway is being built in western Illinois in the U.S. 67 corridor linking the Quad Cities and St. Louis which will extend this trend into another isolated part of the state.

[4]Small towns around small cities are expanding as people seek a semi-rural living experience while commuting to an urban workplace. No urban area in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference is so far from a rural area so as to create an isolated urban zone. Combining rural and urban living could be termed "rurban" as there is no complete dichotomy as might be found in other large urban centers. For a discussion of the term, see "Rurban: What's Up Down On The Farm," Rural Home Missionary Association, http://www.rhma.org/rurban.html (accessed 18 June 2007). There is serious poverty that is both rural and urban. I do not perceive a "Valhalla Syndrome" developing in this conference as described by Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Leadership In The Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 142-143.

[5]James D. Nowlan, "Who We Are by the Numbers," *Illinois Issues: A Publication of the University of Illinois at Springfield* 24, no. 5, (May 1998),under http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/1998/ii980521.html (accessed May 1, 2007).

[6]Illinois Great Rivers Conference, *Official Journal-Yearbook 2000* (Springfield, IL: Illinois Great Rivers Conference, 2000), 392-404.

We in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference are in the midst of a pruning process in our conference. It has been precipitated by several factors:

Greater clarity of God's vision and mission for The United Methodist Church and the Illinois Great Rivers Conference,

Clearly defined strategies for movement toward vision and mission,

A desire on the part of all of us to use most strategically our apportionment dollars,

Nearly four decades of membership and worship decline,

A need to re-invent ourselves in the light of the mission to which God calls us in these times,

A need to right-size ourselves after having lived for eight years into a uniting of two conferences.

We can count on agony and pain as decisions are made to align more tightly our conference resourcing, equipping, and programming with our vision and mission. As with any pruning process, what appears to be disastrous in the short scheme of things may be appropriate action for the long-term benefit to our conference vision and mission.

We can count on excitement and joy as clergy and lay leaders discover new ability and joy in their leadership roles, as congregations become vibrant Christian communities in which people come to life in God's love, and as congregations reach out in ever increasing ways to the spiritually and physically hungry of our world.

In short, we are stoking the fires of the evangelical flow in our conference, and we are already on the way.[7]

This is a very ambitious statement; the greater challenge will be to overcome resistance to change in the cultural system that is the Illinois Great Rivers Conference.

Half of all United Methodist Churches in the United States have an average annual worship attendance of fifty-one or fewer; forty-three percent of these churches did not receive a member by profession of faith in 2004.[8] The total number of large congregations with average attendance greater than two hundred has remained constant, numbering 4,221 in 1972 and 4,222 in 2001, although 806 more of these congregations were found in the Southeastern or South

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[7]Sharon Brown Christopher, "Pruning What Appears to Be Disastrous May Be Appropriate Action for the Long-term Benefit," *The Current: News of Illinois Great Rivers Conference of the United Methodist Church,* April 1, 2005, 11. More resources on vision and mission are available at Illinois Great Rivers Conference, *Cabinet Resources for Local Churches*, http://www.igrc.org/conference/cabinetresources.html (accessed June 18, 2007).

[8]*The United Methodist Newscope* 33, no. 7, (February 18, 2005). "Many Churches Do Not Receive Members By Profession Of Faith," *UM Men,* Fall 2006, 9.

Central Jurisdiction in 2001 than in 1972.[9] Rising compensation costs have changed the

minimum church attendance necessary to retain a full-time and fully credentialed pastor from 45

attenders in 1930 to 75 attenders in 1950 to 125 attenders in 2003; less than 25% of United

Methodist churches today are that size or larger.[10] Over half the congregations present in the

predecessor denominations in 1900 or organized since no longer exist.[11]

The statistical reports printed in the 2007 Journal-Yearbook include data on 907 separate

churches that make up the Illinois Great Rivers Conference. Eight churches reported zero average

attendance. Out of 899 churches reporting a non-zero attendance, 56% or 503 have an attendance

of fifty-one or below.

The churches can be separated into three tiers based on average weekly worship

attendance. The large church tier has thirty-nine churches with an average attendance of three

hundred or more, representing 4.3% of the total number of churches, reporting 611 baptisms and

20,161 worshipers. The mid-size church tier has 171 churches with an average attendance

between one hundred and three hundred, representing 19% of the total churches, reporting 941

baptisms and 27,229 worshipers. The small church tier has 689 churches with an average

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[9]Lyle Schaller, "What Should Be The Norm?" *Circuit Rider*, September/October 2003, 16. The shift to the southern jurisdictions indicates a decline in participation in large congregations in the northern jurisdictions. Experts expect this trend to continue. John H. Southwick, ed., "The Overlooked Migration," *Background Data for Mission 16*, no. 12, December 2004, http://gbgm-umc.org/researchoffice/bdm/2004%20PDFs/December2004.pdf (accessed May 1, 2007).

The decline in membership cannot be blamed entirely on shifting populations, however, because population in the North Central Jurisdiction is increasing while the number and percentage of United Methodists is decreasing. A rising tide does not float all boats. The 2006 Congregational Development Report to the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference indicates that population in the North Central Jurisdiction has increased 24.2% from 1980 to 2000 while United Methodist presence has decreased from forty-two to twenty-nine per one thousand persons, a percentage decrease of 31%. Attendance decreased 2.8%. Illinois Great Rivers Conference, *Official Journal-Yearbook 2006* (Springfield, IL: Illinois Great Rivers Conference, 2006), 283.

[10]Schaller, "What Should Be The Norm?" 16.

[11]Ibid., 17.

attendance of one hundred or less, representing 76.6% of the total churches, reporting 810 baptisms and 27,041 worshipers.[12] Baptisms occur at a rate of one for every thirty-three attenders in the large church tier, one for every twenty-nine attenders in the mid-size tier, and one for every thirty-three attenders in the small church tier.[13] Research by Herb Miller indicates that mid-size churches in the United States are rapidly disappearing.[14]

Current Reality and Problems in Making Disciples

Paragraph 120 of the *Book of Discipline* clearly states the priority of the United Methodist church: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs."[15] Paragraph 121 details the

Rationale for Our Mission:

Jesus' words in Matthew provide the Church with our mission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28:19-20), and "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . And you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (22:37, 39).[16]

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[12]Illinois Great Rivers Conference, *Official Journal-Yearbook 2007* (Springfield, IL: Illinois Great Rivers Conference, forthcoming). According to the 2000 General Minutes of the United Methodist Church, nearly 73% of churches have one hundred or fewer worshipers on Sunday. Bob Wells, *Small Churches Represent Opportunity for Ministry, Pastors Learn,* http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=2&mid=6898 (accessed May 1, 2007).

[13]Illinois Great Rivers, *Official Journal-Yearbook 2007*. United Methodists are baptized once and transfers from other churches are not rebaptized, so baptism is a clearer indication of adult converts and potential converts (children) than reported categories such as "Confession of Faith or Restored."

[14]Herb Miller, "Midsize Church Leadership: Moving Toward God's Vision When Worship Attendance is Between 100 and 300" (Seminar, Net Results Resource Center, Kansas City, MO, April 20, 1994), 4. My district superintendent indicated in 2002 that research by the Cabinet shows that the loss of average worship attendance in the conference comes primarily from the mid-size church tier.

[15]Harriet Jane Olson, ed., *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 87.

[16]Ibid.

Four systemic problems arise as the local church and the Illinois Great Rivers Conference attempt to fulfill the great purpose of disciple-making outlined in the Book of Discipline and the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. These four problems in the ministry context represent a homeostasis to which the system unerringly returns when anxiety is present. The greater the support of a system for change, the more likely the proposed change will only reinforce the current homeostasis and bring no significant change. It is the nature of systems to resist change; without a clear, diagnostic understanding of the four systemic problems, no strategy can hope to overcome the current homeostasis.

First Systemic Problem: Not Making Disciples

Counting creates accountability. An active factory making a product generates inventory that can be counted in the warehouse. A healthy herd of sheep generates lambs that can be counted in the sheepfold. A healthy denomination making disciples generates converts that can be counted in each congregation. When the numbers are not there, the activity is not happening. The numbers indicate that what is being done in the churches does not result in sufficient numbers of countable converts to create positive growth. It is our goal that we make disciples; it is our current reality that we do not make disciples. One wonders why this is so.

There are many answers. There will always be a gap between desired reality and current reality; this gap creates tension.[17] One way for systems to ease tension and maintain homeostasis is to speak loudly in favor of change while doing nothing that would result in change. Hypocrisy is always a comfortable temptation in the face of creative tension. Announcing that our mission

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[17]Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art And Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 156-157, 226. Cf. Weems, *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 123-133.

is to make disciples does not mean that disciples are being made.

It is also possible that we do not know how to make disciples. The general response of clergy to the question of how one makes disciples is that "if people come to worship they eventually become disciples."[18] This view indicates disciple-making as an event, an accidental result due to unknown causes, a mysterious act of God, rather than an intentional process. Churches are busy with many activities that may be very spiritually satisfying but do not make disciples that can be counted; these religious activities rarely interest and involve non-Christians. Based on what churches actually do, the common belief in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference is that proclamation makes disciples, that church buildings make disciples, that worship makes disciples, that advertising and church bulletins make disciples, that a busy church program makes disciples, that church committees make disciples and that acts of mercy, justice and community service make disciples. The numbers indicate that these practices do not make disciples in this ministry context.

All of these church activities are based on an attraction paradigm: if a denomination can make church participation desirable to the lost, they will come to the church; if they stay there long enough, eventually the magical mystery moment will occur when they become disciples. It is therefore necessary to remove anything offensive and all barriers to make entry into the church as easy as possible. When this approach consistently fails, the system responds by pushing the trend as if working harder at what does not work would bring success. The attraction paradigm creates a "come structure" that is not effective in current reality.[19]

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[18]This conclusion comes from conversations with clergy and focus groups I have facilitated over twenty-six years of professional experience within the Illinois Great Rivers Conference.

[19]The motto of an evangelism approach based on the attraction paradigm could be "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." The Igniting Ministry approach has performed a great service by helping churches that have

Evangelical churches seek a salvation event while liturgical churches proclaim a sacramental event.[20] Both are a part of the United Methodist heritage.[21] Jesus and John Wesley also practiced a salvation process of intentional disciple-making, with carefully structured activity by their followers that enhanced the work of God in stages of prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace.[22] Each step of the maturational cycle is necessary to develop disciples who make disciples who make disciples; in creation, only the mature fruit can reproduce.[23] Relational disciple-making as taught by Jesus produces generation after generation of disciples making disciples (2 Timothy 2:2). This follows the creation pattern; as children grow up, diverse gifts lead them into diverse careers, but they also naturally form committed partnerships to bear and raise children to maturity. This cyclical process of disciple-making is delineated in the New Testament and summarized in the Great Commission. It is clearly

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long ignored people in their environment to finally become aware of and open to newcomers. Hospitality, while important and necessary, is an institutional response and only a helpful step toward growth by addition. It is not disciple-making that leads to disciple-makers.

[20]Sacramental events are also understood as "means of grace" and are perceived by some to confer grace. Dunnam states that "Wesley believed that not only is the Lord's Supper a *confirming* experience; it is also a *converting* one." He then quotes Wesley: "The Lord's Supper was ordained by God to be a means of conveying to persons either preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace, according to their particular needs. The persons for whom it was ordained are all who know and feel that they need the grace of God. No fitness is required by a sense of our state of sinfulness and helplessness (*Works*, I, pp. 279f; *Sermons*, I, pp. 251-255)." Maxie Dunnam, *Going On To Salvation: A Study in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1990), 109.

[21]For a discussion of the relationship between sacramentalism and evangelicalism, see Paul S. Sanders, "The Sacraments in Early American Methodism" in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives On American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 77-92.

[22]For a further discussion of salvation event and process, see Henry H. Knight, III, "The Transformation of the Human Heart: The Place of Conversion in Wesley's Theology," in *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition,* Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 43-55. For a study of the topic in the New Testament, see Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999). Eddie Gibbs reflects the tension between conversion as an event or a process in *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes In How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 231.

[23]I have participated in numerous behavioral interviews using the Logan/Ridley process to evaluate Illinois Great Rivers Conference clergy as potential church planters. Cf. Charles Ridley & Robert E. Logan, *Training for Selection Interviewing* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1998). It was exceedingly rare for this highly evangelistically gifted minority to identify a disciple they had converted who later made a disciple of his or her own.

demonstrated in rapidly growing third world cell churches that have developed an environmental system which supports multiple generations of disciples who make disciples who make disciples.

Second Systemic Problem: An Institutional Worldview

An institutional worldview inhibits disciple-making as well as innovation. The Temple and the Sanhedrin were institutions in the days of Jesus; modern denominations exhibit this hereditary characteristic today.[24] The generation that survived World War II understood the power of institutions; the generations that followed mistrust institutions.[25] Institutions call for sacrificial conformity for the sake of the community and the greater good.[26] Modern generations seek personal fulfillment and authentic supportive community. Many approaches to change involve redecorating the surface of institutions with a veneer of postmodern innovation, similar to creating a sports car powered by a steam engine. The attraction paradigm leads churches today to attempt to attract a generation that rejects institutions by creating an oxymoron, a "hip institution."[27]

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[24]One could call an institutional worldview "the leaven of the Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6, 11-12).

[25]Cf. Craig Kennet Miller, *Ministry in the Postmodern Age*, http://www.gbod.org/generation/articles/postmodern.html (accessed June 18, 2007). Craig Kennet Miller, *From Generation to Generation*, http://www.gbod.org/generation/articles/generation.html (accessed June 18, 2007).

[26]Most churches today exist in tension on a continuum between a denominational central authority (a Vatican) attempting to command and control rampant Congregationalism, where the local church functions as its own Vatican; both are institutional ecclesiologies. "Wesley's theology provides third alternatives to 'all the barren polarities generated by centuries of polemics.'" Weems, *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit*, 85. Wesley's "third alternative" to the polarities of an institutional ecclesiology is a systemic, network based paradigm he called "connectionalism."

[27]The attraction paradigm is perfectly satirized as "Catholicism Wow!" in Kevin Smith, *Dogma,* DVD (Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures, 2002). Steve Lansingh's review included the following: "Does the movie have anything to say to the community of believers? I believe so, although the message arrives more like an indictment than encouragement. For example, Cardinal Glick (George Carlin) unveils a promotional campaign called "Catholicism Wow!" in order to attract parishioners, which includes retiring the crucifix and replacing it with "buddy Jesus" -- a cartoonish Jesus giving a big wink and a thumbs-up sign. Nothing in the film made me laugh harder than

The institutional Church seeks to fulfill the will of God with an institutional response.[28] This is true whether one labels the resulting institution as a postmodern "emergent church" or the more liberal/traditional "missional church." Guder and colleagues phrase the problem well but offer the missional church as an institutional response to the waning of the influence of Christendom.[29] They view the culture of religiosity in North America as becoming dangerously "more pluralistic, more individualistic and more private."[30] Diversity at the level of individuals rather than a race or ethnic group is viewed as a challenge "for the Christian who takes the Gospel of Jesus Christ seriously."[31] Institutional desires for centralized conformity can thrive beneath a call for obedience to the "reign of God" as defined by those in power.

The concept of a church "relevant" to contemporary culture reprises the liberal 1960s confrontation of the institutional church of traditional Christendom.[32] Both are dated responses

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the absurd buddy Jesus, and nothing convicted me so forcefully." Cf. Steve Lansingh, "Dogma: 'Smile, God Loves You!'" *Christianity Today,* November 15, 1999.

[28]I acknowledge the difficult conflict of denominational executives, bishops and district superintendents who have a stewardship responsibility for the health of an institution which requires them to view and address problems institutionally rather than organically.

[29]Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 1-45. Eight patterns define the missional church. Cf. Lois Y. Barrett et al., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns In Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), xii-xiv. The missional church perspective is widespread within the Illinois Great Rivers Conference leadership.

[30]Guder, *Missional Church*, 1. Individualism is frequently a healthy reaction of differentiation from institutional enmeshment and manipulation; all people desire freedom from oppression. The missional church proclaims the inbreaking kingdom of God and invites people into a community which will form and shape them into conformity with "biblical" norms; this type of coercion is not new and is antithetical to healthy community. Cf. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Touchstone, 1987), 113, 186.

[31]Guder, *Missional Church*, 1.

[32]Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 46, 28-29, identifies the two factors most negatively correlated to church growth as liberal theology and traditionalism.

owing more to the concerns of the Boomer generation's youth than present-day alienation.[33]

Making institutions more relevant provides no solution to the rapid erosion of church membership. Framing the modern problem, as Guder does, between these two dated positions prevents the emergence of more creative third alternatives that respect all cultures, including unchurched cultures. The stated goal of the missional church is to challenge a culture rather than make disciples of individuals within a culture as required by the Great Commission.[34] Challenging culture was the goal of the Pharisees and Zealots; the New Testament church is far more accepting of Roman oppression than their Jewish contemporaries.[35]

The institutional approach is dehumanizing and depersonalizing. Institutions prefer to deal with a monolithic "people" rather than diverse "persons."[36] The focus of the Great Commission is to make disciples of individuals, not challenge and change cultures. The focus of the Great Commandment is to love individuals, such as God, our neighbor and ourselves. Rather than make disciples, the missional approach seeks to change the Church in order that the Church might change the world.[37] The missional church approach accepts "the definition of the church as God's instrument for Gods' mission, convinced that this is scripturally warranted."[38] An

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[33]Guder, *Missional Church*, 72-73.

[34]"The thrust of the gospel exposition in this book is to define a missionary people whose witness will prophetically challenge precisely those dominant patterns as the church accepts its vocation to be an alternative community." Guder, *Missional Church*, 10.

[35]To some degree the Roman culture protected the early church from terrorism by its native Jewish culture. Cf. Acts 16:38, 21:33-40, 22:25, 23:17-23, 25:21. The New Testament church affirms its secular rulers in Matthew 22:17-21, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13.

[36]Guder, *Missional Church*, 5. As in John 3:16, God did love the monolithic culture ("the world"), but grace is offered to individuals by the term "whosoever."

[37]Guder, *Missional Church*, 86-87.

[38]Guder, *Missional Church*, 5. Cf. ibid., 8. When relational networks are shifted from building relationships with the lost to task oriented, missional service, the flow of new disciples ceases and an unreplenished leadership

instrument is a thing, not a gathering of persons or the body of Christ. The missional church

remains an institutional church; an institutional worldview impedes disciple-making by diverting

resources to institutional maintenance.

Institutions do not make disciples. They have other goals, primarily the preservation of

the past for the comfort of those who are long term participants. Cell church author Ralph W.

Neighbour described the institutional church as the program base design church.[39] The program

base design church is a consumer-driven institution, marketing a variety of programs to meet the

needs of strangers and attract them to the church. They intentionally assimilate uncommitted

people. These congregations grow by receptor growth;[40] newcomers remain consumers of

pastoral care while leaders overfunction codependently and burn out. Jesus and John Wesley

focused on the development of individual people exercising diverse gifts rather than developing

institutional programs where leaders burn out.

Institutions do not adapt; they exist and die, rise and fall. An institution is a non-living

thing; things have a product life cycle. Human communities adapt by blending the old and new in

harmony.[41] A congregation does not attract postmodern individuals by becoming a postmodern

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burns out; for a historical example, cf. Neighbour, *Where Do We Go*, 133-134. Peck's Rule is helpful: *community building first, problem solving second*. Peck, *Different Drum*, 104, 113. Koinonia must precede missional service. Missional service is an important part of spiritual adolescence but needs to be perceived as a stage of individual growth in a cycling discipleship system rather than an end result; relational spiritual parenting is a stage of maturity that lies beyond the stage of missional service.

[39]Neighbour, *Where Do We Go*, 57-76. For a discussion of the differences between the institutional and organic concept of church, see Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 34-35. Guder describes the emergence of the Program Base Design church in 1850-1900 as third of Russell Richey's five distinct historical stages of the American Protestant church in the past two hundred years. Cf. Guder, *Missional Church*, 65.

[40]Carl F. George, *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1994), 37-38.

[41]Matthew 13:52.

institution, a change which any institution would prevent. Converts bring a rich adaptation to current reality into a Christian community when they are not asked to conform, and their very presence brings the community more into balance with current reality. A congregation becomes postmodern by incorporating (literally) postmodern converts with respect and love. The church with an institutional worldview fails to thrive because it is more focused on rebuilding the temple, an unchanging institution, than on providing the spiritual nurture necessary to make disciples who make disciples who make disciples.[42]

An institutional worldview causes denominational leaders to look at churches as institutions with a limited life cycle.[43] Smaller churches are seen as religious corporations that are unable to compete in the new reality of the changing marketplace. Small churches that function as relational networks make poor institutions. Any attempt to change the church as an institution is doomed; institutions do not learn, evolve or adapt because they are not alive.[44] A church is a living thing and reborn with each new convert; it does not have a single life cycle.

Institutional leaders identify a shift in population from rural to urban settings as the cause of rural church decline. Current reality, however, is that fewer and fewer rural areas in downstate Illinois are far from a city or an interstate highway that connects them to what people desire. Princeton, a rural town of eight thousand located 115 miles from the Chicago loop is "close

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[42]Jesus indicated in John 2:19-22 his intention to replace the temple, an institution, with the body of Christ, a relational disciple-making network. The potential threat to the temple is the motivation for his execution. Cf. Mark 14:58.

[43]Illinois Great Rivers Conference, *Official Journal-Yearbook 2004*, 38. Cf. Steven J. Goodwin, *Catching the Next Wave: Leadership Strategies for Turn-Around Congregations* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 11-15.

[44]People in institutions, however, can learn, evolve and adapt if the institution allows the diversity, pluralism, and differentiation that further individual personal change. Most do not.
    For one of the best attempts to update the institutional church, cf. Bill Easum and Bil Cornelius, *Go Big: Lead Your Church to Explosive Growth* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).

enough to the vital metro region to have become a hot relocation spot for telecommuters and early retirees."[45] Rural population will fluctuate, but rural areas are not empty; it is unnecessary to leave rural areas to go where the people are. There are few small towns in central Illinois that do not have a few blocks of new house construction. J. Russell Hale's 1980 research results "suggest that, contrary to public opinion, the unchurched phenomenon in the United States may be primarily rural rather than urban."[46] A more accurate diagnosis of the problem is that rural institutional churches are often unable and unwilling to assimilate strangers who are new to rural communities. The same type of churches in more urban areas are equally ineffective when surrounded by a hundred thousand people of the same culture.[47]

Institutional leaders perceive many churches in the small church tier as being at the end of the product life cycle and prefer the larger, program base design church. These large "receptor" churches grow primarily by assimilating converts produced in other churches.[48] Growth by transfer rather than by conversion implies that persons entering these churches remain at an immature spiritual level because they do not learn to make disciples. Large churches grow in

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[45]Nowlan, *Who We Are by the Numbers.*

[46]J. Russell Hale, *The Unchurched: Who They Are And Why They Stay Away* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 173.

[47]Cf. Joseph Calvin Evers, *The History of the Southern Illinois Conference The Methodist Church* (Nashville: The Parthenon Press, 1964), 218. Many smaller communities are perceived as highly churched. Research by Pastor Jack Montgomery in Jacksonville, Illinois, showed that on average only 27% of a population of twenty-two thousand attended church on a Sunday in October, 1999. This meant that a small county seat town with more than fifty churches had over sixteen thousand residents who did not attend worship on a weekly basis. Research by Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson indicate that the figure nationally is 26%; see Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 3.

[48]The reasons why these churches attract transfers rather than create conversions are complex. Research by Herb Miller indicates that large congregations over 300 in average worship are fewer in number yet the preference of 80% of baby boomers and younger. Miller, "Midsize Church Leadership," 4.

numbers by a process of addition by transfer.[49] Where do these converts originate?

Natural Church Development research indicates that the third strongest negative factor to making disciples is church size:[50]

> The growth rate of churches decreased with increasing size. This fact in and of itself came as no great surprise, because in large churches the percentages represent many more people. But when we converted the percentages into raw numbers, we were dumbfounded. Churches in the smallest size category (under 100 in attendance) had won an average of 32 new people over the past five years; churches with 100-200 in worship also won 32; churches between 200-300 average 39 new individuals; churches between 300-400 won 25. So a 'small' church wins just as many people for Christ as a 'large' one, and what's more, two churches with 200 in worship on Sunday will win twice as many new people as one church with 400 in attendance.[51]

Schwarz found that the average growth rate in smaller churches was 13% over five years, whereas in larger churches it was a mere 3%. A small church with an average attendance of fifty-one typically produced thirty-two persons in five years; megachurches in their sample averaged 2,856 in attendance but converted only 112 new persons. The same number of persons participating in fifty-six small churches averaging fifty-one in attendance would have produced

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[49]Cf. Carl F. George, "New Realities for the 21st Century Church," *The Pastor's Update* 94, tape 7033 (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2001). On this audio tape George states that the vast majority of the members of megachurches are converted elsewhere but come to the megachurch for its varied program activities and its perceived quality of discipleship teaching. This underscores the point that *receptor churches* teach an attractive discipleship that does not make disciples, or there would be an explosion of new Christians originating *within* these churches rather than transferring *into* these churches. *Receptor growth* is growth by addition; *disciples making disciples that make disciples* is growth by multiplication and would account for the tenfold and hundredfold differences in size between American megachurches and gigantic third world cell churches. Eddie Gibbs reflects this data in *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes In How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 151, 153, 173-175. In creation, mature fruit will reproduce. An institutional goal to imitate Program Base Design churches is unlikely to be fruitful in making disciples.

[50]Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 46. The other two negative factors are liberal theology and traditionalism. Cf. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 46, 28-29. These two negative factors combined with laxity result in the institutionalization of the church. Rodney Stark, *For The Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26.

[51]Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 46-47.

1,792 converts in five years.[52]

The institutional worldview perceives smaller churches as nearing the end of a product life cycle. Many are considered doomed, without hope, and in need of hospice care; in some cases this is an accurate diagnosis. Natural Church Development research, however, indicates that smaller churches have far greater potential than larger churches to produce converts that become disciple-makers. This potential is largely unfulfilled in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference; small churches are a vast resource for disciple-making.

An institutional view of the Church is unbiblical.[53] When an institutional worldview is present, the focus of change is upon transforming old "come structure" institutions into postmodern institutions to attract new generations that are fundamentally opposed to institutions. Rather than adding new people to institutions, Jesus calls believers to multiply disciples by practicing the Great Commission as a community of diverse individuals.

Third Systemic Problem: Traditional "Prairie" DNA

Rapidly growing cell churches credit their success to John Wesley's use of class meetings in England. The churches of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference are also hereditary descendants of Wesley's societies with very different characteristics. Expediency, a basic principle in Wesleyan DNA, led to a different adaptation to the prairie environment which is now highly

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[52]Schwarz, *Natural Church Development,* 46-48. Cf. Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 94.

[53]Christ did not call believers to form institutions or even to plant churches. The Great Commission does not call upon believers to convert or change cultures but convert and change individuals. Disciples are called to make disciples, which focuses always on communication between individuals. The church of the New Testament is not an institution but a herd of linked individuals. Both the human body and the body of Christ are composed of individual cells.

resistant to change. Cultural DNA is information which defines norms and homeostasis.

John Wesley was a complex man living in complex times. The Industrial Revolution

brought a vast migration of people from rural to urban areas. The Methodist Societies became a

spiritual village within the city for many dislocated people.[54] Wesley blended methods from

Anglican religious societies and Moravian sources to create an evolving discipleship system that

came to embrace laity in ministry first as small group leaders and then as lay preachers.[55]

Wesley's discipleship system trained people in holiness and spiritual maturity where they lived.

Salvation was a process first of prevenient grace, then justifying grace and finally sanctifying

grace. Methodists remained fully engaged with people at each successive stage of grace and

helped one another to move onward toward perfection.[56] Wesley's primary goal was to change

the behavior of individual people toward holiness; the class meeting was an expedient innovation

that began as a tool to raise funds but soon became Wesley's tool for individual supervision in

holiness.[57] They used tickets with expiration dates to control who remained within the Society.[58]

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[54]A question for historical investigation would be whether there are significant differences between Wesley's practice of Methodism in urban and rural areas. It is possible that I term "Prairie DNA" began in rural England where the stimulus of a smaller rural population brought forth these patterns. If so, then Asbury would only be practicing the form of Methodism with which he was familiar.

[55]Steven W. Manskar, *Small Groups and Accountability: The Wesleyan Way of Christian Formation*, http://www.gbod.org/smallgroup/Manskar_Accountability.pdf (accessed June 18, 2007). Cf. David Hunsicker, "John Wesley: Father of Today's Small Group Concept?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1996), under http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyan_theology/theojrnl/ 31-35/31-1-09.htm (accessed May 1, 2007).

[56]Hunter identifies four stages in Wesley's process compared to nine for Willow Creek. George G. Hunter, III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 154-156.

[57]John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," *The Works of John Wesley,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 8:252-255. There was a problem in Bristol with raising funds for the debt on the New Room. Captain Foy proposed that the Bristol society be subdivided and that each member give one penny. He asked to be assigned eleven of the poorest individuals whom he would visit each week; he would pay the penny for any unable to make a contribution. Each week class leaders met each person in their class, reviewed the behavior and spiritual condition of each individual, reported that condition to the stewards, and turned in an offering from each person. Eventually the decision was made for the class to meet as a group so that those who would seek to deceive the leader about their behavior could be immediately be confronted with the truth by their neighbors. The class meeting was never educational in purpose or focused on bible study, but always on the modification of

Class meetings provided a living human network for the direct spiritual supervision of each person each week.

Wesley kept his people busy.[59] This kept them visible in a busy, urban world.[60] Methodists also attended the local Anglican parish church for worship and the sacraments. All of this activity made the Methodists very visible to their neighbors. The value of holiness was obvious due to the immediate improvement in quality of life. The goal of the movement was to "spread scriptural holiness across the land."[61]

The Wesleyan discipleship system was always more focused on holiness than evangelism; while field preaching drew large crowds, Wesley's Societies statistically "constituted only a fraction of one percent of the populace" in any given year.[62] The crowds did not enter the

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behavior toward holiness. Roy Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 200-201. Unlike the cells of a modern cell church, class meetings did not select their own members, select their own leaders, develop apprentice leaders or multiply into two class meetings.

[58]Wesley, *Plain Account*, 256, 259-260. Wesley created boundaries so that people sorted themselves into groups at the level best suited for them; certain behaviors were required to get a ticket that would allow a person to participate in different activities of the Society. Requirements of obedience made certain that no strangers were present. Participation in a penitent band on Saturday nights cleared the way for return.

[59]Wesley provided his followers with a wide variety of activities in addition to the class meeting so that Methodists always had something holy to do instead of yield to temptation. These activities included twice daily sermons preached at five a.m. on the road to work and in the evening, a variety of small groups called "bands" to practice more intense spiritual discipline, monthly half-night prayer meetings, visitation of the sick and a variety of other community ministries. The complex Wesleyan discipleship system evolved to fulfill what was lacking in the typical Anglican parish, thereby supplementing rather than separating people from the church. One must wonder what would have evolved if Wesley, like Asbury, had been a bishop able to appoint ministers to his liking to parishes under his control. When Methodism was freed of the tension of remaining in the Anglican church and became a church itself, it dropped in time most of what characterized Methodism as Methodism under Wesley. Cf. Wesley, *Plain Account*, 251-252, 255, 257-261.

[60]Wesley's movement used a variety of methods, from the five a.m. preaching to social service, to keep Methodism in the forefront of awareness in urban environments filled with competing recreational distractions, temptations and competing churches. They created a "go" organization which penetrated their communities and drew people into beneficial relationships.

[61]Hattersley, *Life of John Wesley*, 207. Cf. Weems, *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit,* 128.

[62]David Lowes Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 131. Wesley's pattern by itself will not reverse the current membership decline.

societies; they are not an example of rapid evangelistic church growth similar to the church of Acts or modern cell churches. Wesley's emphasis on disciplined behavior, however, made them an influential fraction compared to the passivity of the typical Anglican clergyman. Wesley's societies had high expectations of laity and low expectations of clergy.

Francis Asbury preached the gospel on the empty prairies during a vast migration of people from urban to rural areas. Prairie Methodists simultaneously built churches and communities in the rural wilderness. They faithfully replicated Epworth and Wroot[63] across the Midwestern frontier, replacing passive Anglican curates with fiery Methodist circuit riding preachers. Churches began as class meetings, shepherded between visits of the circuit rider by located preachers or licensed exhorters as class leaders.[64] The terminology on the prairie is one of circuits made up of class meetings rather than Societies of the British type. There is no evidence of multiple classes being formed on the prairie in a single location as was normal in Wesley's urban societies.[65] Class sizes increased to as many as seventy-three.[66] There is no evidence that

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[63]Epworth and Wroot were the small rural parishes in which Wesley grew up, and of a type very familiar to Asbury and all immigrants from England.

[64]One suspects the presence of exhorters and located preachers led to class meetings that were more like worship services between visits of the circuit rider than the careful lay supervision toward holiness found in Wesley's classes in England. Cf. Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion's Harvest Time* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), 20-24. Ferguson indicates this erosion of small group process as coinciding with rise of the camp meeting in 1805 and 1840. Cf. Charles W. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: Methodists and the Making of America* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 149.

[65]Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 14. Melton recognizes the pattern of single classes becoming single churches but refers to "some societies with several classes" in the 1840s without identifying locations; these could have been in urban Chicago. I have found no single specific citing of a downstate Illinois Methodist church with more than one class meeting and no record of the use of bands or select bands on the prairie. Cf. J. Gordon Melton, *Log Cabins to Steeples: the Complete Story of the United Methodist Way in Illinois Including All Constituent Elements of the United Methodist Church* (n.p.: The Commissions on Archives and History, Northern, Central and Southern Illinois Conferences, 1974), 109, 111.

[66]Charles Edward White, "The Rise And Decline Of The Class Meeting," *Methodist History* 40, no. 4 (July 2002), http://myweb.arbor.edu/cwhite/cm.pdf (accessed June 4, 2007), 7. Pagination is from the online resource.

anything like the band system developed on the prairie; the band concept was strenuously pushed in the first *Book of Discipline* of 1785 but all references had disappeared from the *Discipline* by 1844.[67] Class meetings and tickets were the major elements of Wesleyan Methodism found on the prairie.

Prairie class meetings became prairie churches, based on a single cell; this is a classic limitation to church growth as classes grew larger and became small churches.[68] The role of the class meeting to enforce church discipline seemed to disappear in America by the mid-nineteenth century.[69] Both Watson and White note that the tone of writings on class meetings in the nineteenth century in America becomes increasingly apologetic and persuasive, concluding that the once natural popularity of the class meeting must be waning.[70] Class meetings flourished in early days between visits of the circuit riders ranging from once a month to six months.[71] As Methodists formed churches, the old timers in the class meeting experienced power struggles with the shift to resident clergy.[72] The non-denominational Sunday School movement also put

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[67]Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 75.

[68]For information on single cell churches and church growth resistance, see Carl Dudley, *Making the Small Church Effective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 32-60.

[69]White, "Rise and Decline of the Class Meeting," 4n29. Cf. David Lowes Watson, *Class Leaders: Recovering A Tradition* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 50-51.

[70]"Wesley's problem seems to be keeping the classes pure, while his successors' problem seems to be keeping the classes going." White, "Rise and Decline of the Class Meeting," 5. Cf. Watson, *Class Leaders*, 44.

[71]The 1872 Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church indicates a second purpose in the "design of the organization of classes" is to "establish and keep up a meeting for social and religious worship, for instruction, encouragement and admonition that shall be a profitable means of grace to our people." This is a purpose far wider than Wesley's class meeting and probably reflects actual practice. Cf. Watson, *Class Leaders*, 48. Cf. Evers, *History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 14.

[72]Watson, *Class Leaders*, 48-50, 152.

pressure on the Methodist class system as early as 1830[73] and is widely seen as displacing the

class meeting after 1875.[74] Participation in the class meeting as a requirement of membership was

discontinued in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1872.[75]

It is an gross oversimplification, however, to say that Methodism on the American

frontier went "where the people were."[76] Early Methodism, according to Lovett Weems, "seemed

more at home in rural settings" and was more successful there.[77] Asbury developed "a distinct

rural orientation adept at expanding into thinly populated areas."[78] Asbury and his

contemporaries deliberately chose to plant churches in isolated rural settings, avoiding even the

developing towns as "alien to Methodist values and 'famous for wickedness.'"[79] Eighteen of

twenty Methodist chapels in the Delmarva peninsula of Delaware in 1784 were in the

countryside.[80] The *Western Christian Advocate* in 1843 notes that in the Midwest, "the towns

were almost universally avoided by our preachers as places of too much dissipation for the

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[73]Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 85, 88, 119, 121, 144. The growing emphasis on Sunday School diverts leaders and energy from class meetings. Cf. Watson, *Class Leaders*, 51-52. Watson*, Early Methodist Class Meeting*, 137, notes that references to the class meeting decline abruptly in British Methodist autobiographies in the 1830s. Yet White notes that there is some evidence of a 40% continued participation in the class meeting in 1900. Cf. White*, "Rise and Decline of the Class Meeting,"* 5n35.

[74]Watson, *Class Leaders*, 75.

[75]White*, "Rise and Decline of the Class Meeting,"* 6. The same change occurred in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in 1866 and in Britain in 1912. For an excellent description of the causes of the decline, cf. Watson, *Class Leaders*, 39-59.

[76]Weems, *Leadership In The Wesleyan Spirit*, 21-22.

[77]Ibid., 23.

[78]Nathan Hatch, quoted by Weems, *Leadership In The Wesleyan Spirit*, 22.

[79]Weems, *Leadership In The Wesleyan Spirit*, 24.

[80]Ibid. For a broader description, cf. William H. Williams, "The Attraction of Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula as a Case Study, 1769-1820" in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives On American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 31-45.

Gospel to obtain a foothold."[81] Asbury did not go where the people were or would be; Asbury

went where there was no competition to holiness from outside influences.[82]

Methodism has continually adopted new methods as expediency provides them. The

camp meeting shaped prairie Methodism. Asbury called camp meetings "fishing with a large

net."[83] It is hard to imagine in this century the human hunger for socialization and activity which

the camp meeting fulfilled in the prairie environment. When Alexis De Tocqueville asked a

Detroit man in 1831 if religion had reached that "half peopled" area, he replied:

> Almost every summer, it is true, some Methodist preachers come to make a tour of the
> new settlements. The noise of their arrival spreads with unbelievable rapidity from cabin
> to cabin - it's the great news of the day. At the date set, the immigrant, his wife, and
> children set out by scarcely cleared forest trails toward the indicated meeting place. They
> come from fifty miles around. It's not in a church that the faithful gather but in the open
> air under the forest foliage. A pulpit of badly squared logs, great trees felled for seats,
> such are the ornaments of this rustic temple. The pioneers and their families camp in the
> surrounding woods. It's there that, during three days and three nights, the crowd gives
> itself over to almost uninterrupted religious exercises. You must see with what ardor
> these men surrender themselves to prayer, with what attention they listen to the solemn
> voice of the preacher. It's in the wilderness that people show themselves almost starved
> for religion.[84]

The camp meetings countered rural isolation by combining religious activity in the center of the

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[81]Weems, *Leadership In The Wesleyan Spirit*, 24.

[82]Roger W. Stump, "Regional Migration and Religious Commitment in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 23, no. 3 (September 1984): 292-304. Stump's experimental results favor the "adaptation model's prediction that religious commitment rises among migrants to regions of higher native commitment, such as the South, and fails among migrants to regions of lower commitment." Asbury's placement of churches in isolated settings, therefore, creates a high expectation environment which will have a higher evangelistic influence on those living nearby; placing churches in town would give the majority of "sinners" a greater influence over a minority of Methodists. Asbury did not need to locate churches in towns to draw a crowd, be visible or have an influence due to the camp meeting's ability to draw a crowd during the nineteenth century.

[83]Russell E. Richey, "From Quarterly to Camp Meeting: A Reconsideration of Early American Methodism," *Methodist History* 23, no. 1 (July 1985): 202.

[84]G. W. Pierson, "Tocqueville and Beaumont in America," quoted in Johnson*, Frontier Camp Meeting*, 231-232.

camp with socializing, courting, barter and recreation on the outer edges.[85] This tradition of combining evangelistic preaching with family vacations evolved into the Chautauqua movement, both in resort settings and traveling tents.[86] Camp meetings eventually became campgrounds and then conference owned church camps, at Asbury's suggestion.[87] The camp meeting was the primary evangelistic tool of the Second Great Awakening in United States history and so successful that it doubled the proportion of church members in America from one in fifteen to one in seven between 1800 and 1850.[88]

The camp meeting is the quintessential "come structure" of American religious history. Both the camp meeting and the prairie church met the human need for socialization in the midst of rural isolation. Both drew a large crowd because they were the only source for human interaction on the frontier. Revivals would later be organized around the visit of an elder at quarterly conference who would provide the sacrament to members followed by camp meetings open to the public. These events created a community that "defined itself by act" or by an event, rather than by an address.[89]

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[85]Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 119-120, 124, 129-131. Cf. Johnson*, Frontier Camp Meeting*, 3, 208-228, 234-236, 240, 243-244. Cf. Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 24-25. Cf. Melton, *From Log Cabins to Steeples*, 115.

[86]Charles A. Parker, "The Camp Meeting on the Frontier and the Methodist Religious Resort in the East: Before 1900," *Methodist History* 18 (April 1980): 179-192. For an example, see The Lakeside Association, *History of Lakeside*, http://www.lakesideohio.com/lakesideexperience/History.aspx (accessed June 18, 2007). Cf. Johnson*, Frontier Camp Meeting*, 245-247. Cf. Melton, *Log Cabins to Steeples*, 119.

[87]Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 145.

[88]Jeffrey K. Hadden and Anson Shupe, *Televangelism: Power & Politics On God's Frontier* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1981), http://religiousbroadcasting.lib.virginia.edu/ powerpolitics/C6.html (accessed May 1, 2007), 102. Cf. Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2006), 206-210.

[89]Russell E. Richey, "From Quarterly to Camp Meeting: A Reconsideration of Early American Methodism," *Methodist History* 23, no. 1 (July 1985): 205, 203-213.

Events brought people together; God acting in grace seemed less a salvation process and more of a salvation event. It was God, acting in a series of events, who convicted the sinner, brought the crowds of sinners to the camp meeting, brought salvation through the response to an evangelistic sermon and brought sanctification as a second work of grace. Any human role was minimized. The salvation event, mediated by a gospel preacher, is the descendent of the sacramental event mediated by a priest ordained in apostolic succession. Anglican sacramentalism, too, is a part of the Wesleyan heritage.[90] Prairie DNA continues to focus on events as the method to bring people into the church building to hear the gospel.

On the prairie the process of salvation became one which sought to get people into a service of worship where they might respond to the proclamation of the gospel by the preacher rather than one which sought to get people into a class meeting where they might be spiritually mentored by a lay person. All barriers were dropped and all activities of the church were opened; who could tell but that this day was a sinner's last opportunity to experience salvation? Evangelism became focused on decision-making events rather than on disciple-making community.[91] Revival services became crowds of strangers before, during and after time in worship. New class meetings would not be formed to disciple the new converts; a few would become incorporated into a single existing class meeting already crowded with advanced

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[90]From a sacramental point of view, salvation occurs at the event of Christian baptism and the event of holy communion confers spiritual strength and maturity as a means of grace. There is a trend among modern churches to embrace the sacramental faith of justification through baptism and sanctification by good works. Wesley supports sacramentalism but declares it insufficient in section four of John Wesley's sermon, "The New Birth," *Works of John Wesley,* 6:75-76. Cf. Ted A. Campbell, "Conversion and Baptism in Wesleyan Spirituality" in Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson, eds., *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 160-174. Whether evangelical or liturgical, this approach relies on the paradigm of a salvation event which occurs during worship rather than in ongoing relationships of community participation. One modern form of seeking a salvation event through worship is someone "serving Christ" by watching worship broadcast on television.

[91]Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Pasadena, CA: Church Growth Press, 1982), 9.

disciples. Rather than training new disciples to become disciple-makers, classes focused on personal piety and holiness.

The camp meeting event forever shaped the prairie Methodist experience. The great "two a day" checkerboard church planting that began after the Civil War replicated these small "come structure" churches every five to seven miles apart in the rural countryside.[92] Prairie DNA was phenomenally successful in its time; from 1860-1920 the Methodist Episcopal Church grew from one million to well over four million members,[93] far outperforming Wesley's societies. This membership increase coincides with the end of the requirement that all Methodists participate in class meeting as a condition of membership.[94] After vigorous employment in the 1870s, "after 1880 there is no mention of camp meetings being encouraged officially by the Southern Illinois conference."[95] This expedient tool shaped the prairie Methodist experience and that historical influence is active and visible today.

Prairie DNA shapes the Illinois Great Rivers Conference paradigm. Cultural DNA controls and maintains a homeostasis of traditionalism,[96] preventing church growth by inhibiting

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[92]Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference,* 148. Southern Baptists averaged four hundred missions a year in the 1890s and thirteen hundred in the 1990s, a daily average of 3.6 a day. Lyle Schaller, *The Interventionist* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 195-196.

[93]Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., "Part Two: The Nineteenth Century," in John G. McEllhenney, ed., *United Methodism In America: A Compact History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 91.

[94]White*, "*Rise and Decline of the Class Meeting*,"* 6. The requirement was ended in the Methodist Episcopal South in 1866 and the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1872.

[95]Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 145. The holiness movement was well received in Southern Illinois but suspect within the Methodist Episcopal denomination. While the conference remained officially distanced, participation continued unofficially; six Holiness Camp Meeting Associations were founded in the first half of the twentieth century in Southern Illinois, with Methodists providing the major support in five of them. Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 153-155, 171-172. Cf. Ferguson, *Organizing to Beat the Devil*, 280-285.

[96]Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 46, 28-29. One could argue that self-righteous traditionalism could be called "the leaven of the Pharisees;" cf. Luke 12:1, Matthew 16:6, 11-12 and Mark 8:15.

the historic Methodist tendency to expediently adapt to changing conditions. Prairie DNA has eleven basic characteristics.

First, Prairie DNA operates as a "come structure" focused on attraction. Second, Prairie DNA has an institutional worldview focused on the church building as the place for people to come. Third, it uses events to draw people to the building. Fourth, it seeks to be visible within the community by promoting these events. Fifth, it lowers barriers in an attempt to make the institution more attractive to outsiders. Sixth, Prairie churches experience community in conversations before and after worship and other events. These practices all reflect the customs of the camp meeting era.

Seventh, Prairie churches are organized and controlled by a single cell of persons. Eighth, these lay leaders are resistant to new ideas and new people. The old timers will rarely allow the pastor to lead. A classic symptom of Prairie DNA is the conviction that laity in the church know more about Scripture, spirituality and what their church should do than their seminary educated pastor.[97] The goal of prairie DNA is to keep the church as close as possible to the way it was in the days of the second Great Awakening; this is often seen in the choice of songs to sing. In the labeling of generations such as Modern, Postmodern and Millennial, prairie church folk are by preference still living in the nineteenth century or earlier.

Ninth, assimilation of newcomers whose primary contact with a church is through a

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[97]Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, 46, 28-29, identifies the two factors most negatively correlated to church growth as liberal theology and traditionalism. The pattern of appointing comparatively liberal clergy to churches composed of comparatively traditional laity has been very common in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference for more than a century. It has been perceived as a resistance to an educated clergy but not understood as a reason for church decline when the two most negative growth factors are brought together in conflict. Cf. Evers*, History of the Southern Illinois Conference*, 140-142, 157-160. For a 1968 analysis of this trend, see Rodney Stark and Charles Y. Glock, *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 213-223.

worship service is a challenge requiring a high investment of energy.[98] Tenth, prairie evangelism focuses on a salvation event mediated by a preacher and offered less and less frequently. Wesley's followers heard evangelistic sermons twice daily and were individually coached every week in the class meeting. On the prairie, revival events are first quarterly, then annually, and finally disappear. Rather than challenging people to practice a disciplined faith in a small group on a weekly basis, prairie churches assimilate uncommitted people. When sin brings suffering, prairie churches try to soothe problems through pastoral care rather than solve problems through repentance and holiness.

Finally, when prairie churches are under stress they remain faithful to their DNA and respond by pushing the trend to preserve their traditional homeostasis. They do something to the building itself in order to make it more attractive.[99] They call upon the pastor to do more and lower the requirements for laity in the hope of attracting strangers; prairie DNA has low expectations of laity and high expectations of clergy. They offer more events to draw people in. They make a heartfelt gesture at ministering to community needs. They continue to do what worked over a century ago to attract people; it continues to fail.

The old ways fail today because the world has changed. The world today has more attractive buildings than the church. Society offers more exciting and entertaining events than the church. The old church softball league in the church yard is replaced by a multitude of agencies from the YMCA to schools to park districts offering a wide diversity of sports in expensive

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[98]For assimilation methods, see Michael J. Coyner and Douglas T. Anderson, *The Race to Reach Out: Connecting Newcomers to Christ in a New Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

[99]Church planting consultant Jim Griffith stated that the first action of a "bad DNA" church to the growing stress of membership decline will be to first "do something to the church sign" and then fix up other parts of the church building and grounds to be more attractive. Jim Griffith, presentation, Office of Congregational Development, Conference Office, Springfield, IL, March, 2005.

facilities. There are no isolated areas left where the church can be simultaneously mediocre and superior because there is no competition from the world. The church's amateur attempts at social service are dwarfed by the deep pockets and dedicated professionals working in government and social service agencies ranging from welfare to Big Brother-Big Sister. The world has secularized and improved the quality of all these attraction ministries, and now the church cannot compete. It is not that there is a migration of rural people to urban areas; there is a migration of urban culture to rural areas. It is all urban now, and the prairie DNA church can neither cope with the change nor compete with a secular world that has adapted to current reality. The gap between church reality and current reality can be measured in decades.

Fourth Systemic Problem: Stranger Evangelism

Donald McGavran's controversial *Principle of Homogeneity* states "Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."[100] An institutional worldview interprets the best target for evangelism to be a homogenous unit as large as a tribe or an ethnic group. The homogenous principle is perceived to lead to the development of a large, ethnically pure institution conforming to organizational norms. This is deemed unethical in American society and is an impossible achievement due to the growing diversity of American society. Marketing once targeted large segments of the population. Marketing today recognizes human diversity and caters to smaller and smaller segments of the population in order to increase sales by meeting more and more specific needs.

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[100]Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 198. Generally, cells are homogenous while the entire church is heterogenous and accepts all socioeconomic and cultural diversities. Paul Yongii Cho with R. Whitney Manzano, *More Than Numbers* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 46, 44.

McGavran's definition of a homogenous unit is "simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common."[101] A positive rewording of the homogenous principle is that people prefer to hear the gospel from persons where there is a relationship of positive kinship rather than from strangers. All cultures mistrust strangers. A first corollary would be that the stronger the relationship of positive kinship, the fewer the barriers to the gospel because of increased trust. A second corollary would be that people prefer to respond to the gospel presented by people who are known to be trustworthy rather than those known to be hypocrites. A third corollary would be that the smaller the target group in a diverse society, the fewer the barriers to kinship; a group of two or three with an existing, positive relationship would provide no barriers to kinship at all.

Human societies are actually living social networks of relationships where each person is linked by diverse forms of kinship. A gospel that spreads along human kinship networks will eventually unite people across all ethnic and socioeconomic barriers. Jesus, John Wesley and third world cell churches evangelize along these existing human networks. Win Arn and Ralph Neighbour call this an *oikos* approach, using the New Testament Greek word (οικος) referring to a person's "sphere of influence, his/her social system composed of those related to each other through common kinship ties, tasks, and territory."[102] Conversion is more directly related to relational influences on an individual than any other factor.[103]

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[101]Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 85.

[102]Ralph W. Neighbour, Jr., as quoted in Win Arn*, Master's Plan for Making Disciples*, 37. The *oikos* approach is the theme of the entire book. Cf. Neighbour, *Where Do We Go*, 133-140.

[103]Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 7-13. Cf. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 114-138.

Leadership is influence.[104] Influence exists only within relationships. The work of the

pastor is to equip the saints for the work of ministry; that ministry is the building up the body of

Christ.[105] The work of ministry to which the saints are called is specifically *oikodomeo*

(οικοδομεω), translated in the New Testament as either "building up" or "edifying" but can be

understood in modern terminology as networking, linking, or connecting. The ministry of the

saints is the relational task of building community.

Building up the body of Christ literally means building true community between the

members and, by extension, with potential converts.[106] The kingdom of God spreads from person

to person within human networks of influence. Modern culture hungers for this sort of relational,

nurturing intimacy: "The most powerful message for postmoderns may be to let the church be the

church - not an institution but a living, breathing, missionary community."[107] The laity are called

to a relational ministry of building up links between people of the body of Christ. Acts of

Christian love among neighbors build ongoing relationships that prepare individuals for

conversion through conversation; over time these persons can be discipled toward maturity in a

cell group that functions as a nuclear spiritual family.[108] In times past people were looking for a

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[104]J. Oswald Sanders, quoted in George Barna, *Leaders on Leadership* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1997), 21, 183.

[105]Ephesians 4:12. I prefer the "triple definition of the one purpose" interpretation by Markus Barth in "VI. The Church Without Laymen and Priests" in *Ephesians: Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1974), 34a:477-484. The saints are equipped for missional acts of service which result in the relational community of οικοδομεω.

[106]My definition of community used in this study guide is that described in Peck, *Different Drum*, 86-135. For the decline in social capital, cf. Office of Research, General Board of Global Ministries, "A Bowling Revival," *Background Data for Mission* 12, no. 11, November 2000, under http://gbgm-umc.org/researchoffice/bdm/bdm0011.cfm (accessed June 18, 2007).

[107]Jonathan Campbell, "Postmodernism: Ripe For A Global Harvest - But Is The Church Ready?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 35, (October, 1999): 432-437.

[108]This is the heart of Willow Creek's seven step strategy, which defines a process where seeker friendly

friendly church; now they are simply looking for friends.

Traditional Prairie DNA presumes that people know each other prior to church involvement. Robert Putnam's research indicates that American networks of engagement are breaking down and that this loss of "social capital" is the primary cause of many serious social problems.[109] As the church is the primary builder of social networks, the decrease in social capital is both a cause and a result of the decline of church participation in America.[110] The church is failing in the work of building and maintaining the bridges of God between people.

There were no strangers in Wesley's Methodism. Wesley's followers performed acts of mercy toward their neighbors and included them in lifelong small groups for ongoing support and encouragement. Today's churches seek to attract strangers to worship where they come to know God but never come to know the person in the next pew. Members are encouraged to invite strangers to worship. Today's churches prefer to perform acts of mercy to strangers whom they will never see again. The same act of kindness in the context of an ongoing relationship is far more influential and loving.

The stranger focus is widespread within the church today. Christians prefer to share the gospel with strangers. The greater the cross-cultural gulf, the greater the adventure and attraction to minister to strangers. The culture even practices random acts of kindness to strangers. It is a

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individual relationships as a means of prevenient grace lead to seeker sensitive worship and finally to seeker supportive small groups as a means of sanctifying grace. Cf. Bill Hybels, *The Seven Step Philosophy* (Barrington, IL: Seeds Tape Ministry, 1999), audiotape # c9002.

[109]Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Putnam's work is described online at The Saguaro Seminar, *Civic Engagement in America*, http://www.bowlingalone.com/ (accessed August 17, 2007). For another description of the decline of social capital in neighborhoods, see Mary Pipher, *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 82-107.

[110]Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 65-79, 391-392, 408-410.

good thing, for example, to bus suburbanites into the inner city to work with the homeless; the relational answer to the problem of the homeless, however uncomfortable and unrealistic it might be, is all those empty bedrooms in suburbia.

Ministry to strangers, like all addictions, has its own high; at the root it is a means of avoiding long-term intimacy with people. This violates all biblical commands to love one another (1 Corinthians 13, John 13:33-34, 1 John 4:7-8, Matthew 22:35-40). Ministry to strangers allows hypocrisy; pseudo-holiness can impress strangers, but persons who know us immediately notice our lack of holiness, wholeness and a better life because of Christ. John Wesley purged his Societies so that an improving quality of life that resulted from holiness was a clear, consistent witness to the *oikos* of each individual Methodist.[111] When the Methodists stopped walking to work to listen to the five a.m. evangelistic preaching, those with whom they had influence stopped and also listened. Hypocrisy destroys local influence, but ministry to strangers allows hypocrisy to remain unaddressed.

John Wesley's Societies did not practice ministry to strangers, but ministry that created community through long term relationships of influence. To convert people without the relational support that will disciple them fully toward sanctification is like fathering children and then abandoning them. Wesley resolved not to preach where he could not include everyone in class meetings for spiritual community:

> I was more convinced then ever that the preaching like an apostle without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokeshire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connexion; and the consequence is, that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than

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[111]David Garrison refers to the lack of a healthy, holy contrast as "unsavory salt" and deadly to the spreading of the church. David Garrison, "Seven Deadly Sins: How To Kill A Church Planting Movement" in *Mission Frontiers*, November-December 2004, 14.

ever.[112]

Acts of evangelism and acts of mercy to strangers, as they do not result in ongoing relationships that heal, support and spiritually nurture, are fundamentally selfish acts. Stranger evangelism does not make disciples that make disciples that make disciples.

The attraction paradigm combined with evangelism as a salvation event has resulted in the approach of inviting persons to worship where they arrive as strangers, worship with strangers, leave as strangers, and remain strangers. Even the most progressive congregations face a cultural reality that as many as half the active members will serve Christ only by participating in worship.[113] This is not biblical discipleship as practiced by Jesus, John Wesley or in modern cell churches. In cell churches Christians love their neighbors and welcome them into nurturing spiritual nuclear families where disciples are spiritually born and raised within healthy human networks of Christian love.

Project Purpose

In 2003 I was trained as one of six certified consultants supporting the Office of Congregational Development of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference. In 2004 this judicatory unit was given the responsibility of responding to requests for consulting in church growth and revitalization from over 120 individual churches within the next twelve months. The large number of requests threatened to overwhelm the capacity of these part-time consultants to

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[112]John Wesley, "Journal" (August 25, 1763), *The Works of John Wesley,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 3:144. This reflects a 90% loss of the faithful when there is worship available in the parish church without participation in a cell type community as a means of sanctifying grace.

[113]E. Carver McGriff and M. Kent Millard, *The Passion Driven Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 86.

respond in a timely and effective manner. The majority of these requests were for participation in

a yet-to-be-developed guided Self-Study Process or Percept's *ReVision* program. This project

was designed to solve this ongoing problem.

This project has two purposes. First, I propose to meet this need for consulting by

developing a seminar based Self-Study process to present basic information on church growth,

create shared vision and prepare participating churches to enter a more rigorous consulting

process. Consulting is normally a long-term, interpersonal, on-site process, while a seminar

approach can absorb an unlimited number of participants in a cost-effective and timely manner.

The seminars will combine relational methods of evangelism derived from third world cell

churches with relational methods of overcoming resistance to change based on the work of Peter

Senge, Everett Rogers and Geoffrey Moore. Completion of such a self-study process is a

reasonable first step in the consulting process.

The second purpose is based on research from the *Diffusion of Innovations* which

indicates that when a critical mass of a people group has adopted an innovation, it will rapidly

overcome resistance and its full adoption is inevitable.[114] Rapid adoption can "take off

somewhere between the 5% and 20% level of adoption" among interdependent participants in a

relational network.[115] The second goal of the project is to bring about adoption of evangelistic

innovations by a critical mass of the clergy, then from clergy to a critical mass of laity in a

critical mass of the churches of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference. This could fuel a

conference-wide transformation as a critical mass within each group begins to make disciples. As

clergy are transferred from church to church, the innovation of making disciples will spread,

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[114]Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations,* 4th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 313-330.

[115]Ibid., 324

creating a homeostasis of church growth rather than church decline.

Something must be done with the majority of churches in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference. The large churches have financial resources to hire nationally known consultants. The health of the mid-size tier is critical, and will require many of the resources of the Office of Congregational Development to reverse declining trends. Hopefully this project can make a significant difference in the 77% of churches that make up the small church tier. It is likely that these seminars may be the only consulting support these small churches will receive.

A systemic change process utilizes information communicated interpersonally through a human relational network to get the snowball rolling. As the diffusion of an innovation reaches critical mass, the new innovation rapidly spreads throughout the formerly resistant system. In this way, innovations that make disciples that make disciples that make disciples can spread throughout the marginal churches of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference so that the entire system might once again thrive on the prairie.