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A Fresh Perspective on the Churches in Connection:
Reimagining Cooperative Parishes in the United Methodism

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Abstract

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Cooperative parish is a description of the ways that United Methodist congregations work together. Although it is becoming a means to resolve appointment issues, done with a clear purpose and strategy, cooperative parish ministry can offer a unique tool for churches to keep their missional vitality. This study examines the characteristics of effective cooperative parish models in the United Methodist context by using a quadrant analysis of the forms of cooperation and interviews with fruitful leaders. This research also presents practical deliberation on the development of cooperative parish in reflection of an innovation project implemented in Woodbridge, Virginia.

A Fresh Perspective on the Churches in Connection: Reimagining Cooperative Parishes in the United Methodism

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Introduction

The United Methodist Church (UMC) identifies itself as a connectional church. That is true in a variety of senses. By its episcopal polity, congregations are under the supervision of the denominational hierarchy, and this oversight structure connects churches. The denomination is also global, connecting nations to nations throughout the quadrennial General Conference, General Boards, and the Council of Bishops. On the other hand, however, connectionalism is one of the most underperforming characteristics of the UMC. While the appointment system can nurture the effectiveness of the discernment process for pastoral assignments, by its nature, the system is significantly vulnerable to creating a culture of competition as well. Churches and clergy tend to contend with each other to obtain a better reputation and get attention from the authorities.

Meanwhile, many congregations within the United Methodism are at stake. Churches are struggling with consistent decline, and such a tendency has lasted over a few decades thus far. Numerous churches face challenges due to the lack of ministry capacity, now below the critical mass for growth and maintenance. The global Covid-19 pandemic expedited the decline. To make matters worse, the internal turmoil within the UMC, caused by theological disagreements over LGBTQ+ inclusion, initiated the disaffiliation of local churches. Several communities across the country now see a rare presence of United Methodism, which notably weakens the missional capability of the church and its connection. The aftermath was particularly devastating to small congregations.[1]

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[1] Lovette H. Weems, Jr., "Disaffiliating United Methodist Churches, 2019-2023: Final Report," *Lewis Center for Church Leadership* (January 16, 2024): 5-6, accessed September 29, 2024, https://www.churchleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Disaffiliating-UM-Churches-report-Jan-2024.pdf.

Given such environments, this research aims to explore and exemplify some practical ways of cooperative parish ministry within the United Methodist connection. Recently, there have been a series of vital studies on the subject of cooperative parishes, a Methodist term used to describe the ways that two or more churches jointly work together in certain forms.[2] I believe that cooperative ministry can be a way to empower the future mission of churches in struggling circumstances and reclaim the connectional strength and foundation of the UMC.

Additional information can help explain the methodology of this study. The context of my ministry encompasses two distinguished settings. On one hand, I am currently serving as a pastor at Old Bridge United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, Virginia. On the other hand, I am also projected to serve as the district superintendent (DS) of the Shenandoah River District of the Virginia Annual Conference, starting July 1, 2025. While this announcement came out recently, the initial projection was made more than a year ago when I was brainstorming the draft of this study. Although this change of context imposes additional complexity, it also allows a unique opportunity to diversify research approaches. This research primarily comprises two parts to fully reflect on the two distinctive perspectives in this transition. The first half of the paper will explore the models of cooperative parishes using a quadrant case study, which will provide meaningful insight into my future assignment as a DS. The second half will focus on the innovation project implemented in my current context at Old Bridge Church.

The Concept and Models of Cooperative Parishes

Cooperative parish is not a novel concept to the United Methodists. The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (BOD), the denomination's constitution book, dedicates a particular section to explain the definition and importance of the ministry in

[2] *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 2020/2024 (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2024), ¶206.2.

cooperation. It urges Annual Conferences, a regional body that governs the churches within its missional and/or geographical boundaries, to allocate specific personnel or leadership to support cooperative parish ministries. The book also proposes a wide range of potential patterns of the ministry. The scope of the list is quite expansive, as it covers from loose and exploratory collaboration methods to much tighter forms of cooperation. To briefly enumerate, a few notable suggested models include below items:[3]

- Multiple Charge Parishes: A group of charges that has a coordinator, while each charge still has its own charge conference and appointed clergy;
- Larger Parish: Two or more churches that have a parish-wide governing council;
- Blended Ministry: Merging of congregations within a specific geographical area with multiple worship or program locations;
- Enlarged Charge: Cooperation of churches of similar size on the same charge with shared leadership;
- Extended/Shared Ministry: A larger membership church sharing ministry with smaller membership congregation(s);
- Shared Facilities: Congregations sharing a facility or property for a shared goal.

The fundamental intent of the list is not necessarily to exclusively confine and classify each model. The section instead presents potential ways to implement fruitful cooperative parishes, and thus, the proposed models are subject to customization and modification. The BOD also explains that two or more forms may be combined as deemed appropriate for the context.

Cooperative parishes are most commonly executed as multi-point appointments within the UMC. It means assigning a clergyperson to more than two congregations simultaneously,

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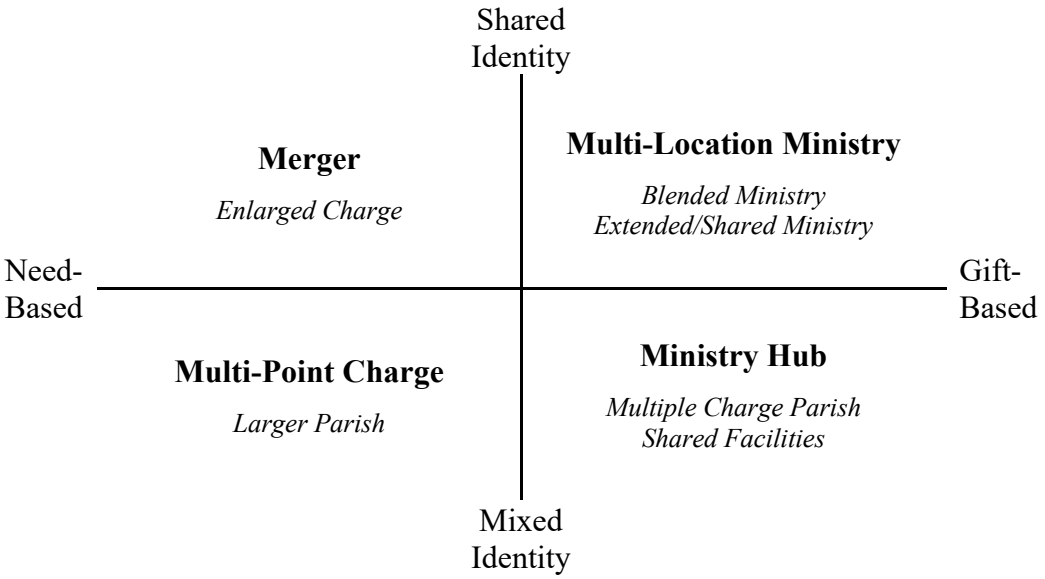
[3] *Book of Discipline*, ¶206.3.

called a 'charge.' Since multi-point charge closely exemplifies the Methodist tradition of 'circuit-riding,' in which one or more preachers travel to preach and lead the churches under their appointment, members of congregations have relatively little resistance to this particular way of cooperation. Still, there are various other ways to effectively utilize cooperative parishes, and some creative models are already in practice across the United Methodist connection.

Reading the BOD and books with related topics, as well as interviews with ministry leaders carrying out a particular form of cooperative parish, has led to the conclusion that the practice of cooperative parishes in the UMC can be compiled into four different categories. By the characteristics of cooperation, I respectively call each quadrant (1) Merger, (2) Multi-Point Location, (3) Multi-Point Charge, and (4) Ministry Hub. While none of these terms are incredibly new, the quadrant model can serve the purpose of understanding the practical application of cooperative parishes in the context of the UMC. The italicized titles below each category also indicate where, in these quadrants, the cooperative model(s) proposed by the BOD can be affiliated.



In a previous study, Kotan and Stanley asserted that a merger, multi-site church, or multi-point charge should not be considered a form of cooperative parish.[4] In a sense, their point is legitimate. The primary purpose of such joint ministries is often created by a sense of scarcity or urgency, instead of vision-oriented timely conversations. The traditional practice of a merger, multi-site church, or multi-point charge rarely serves the goal of cooperative parish ministry in such cases. Having said that, in this paper, I would rather take a broader approach to the definition of cooperative parishes. This research has been convincing that creative ways of merging congregations or uniquely implementing ministry in multiple locations or a charge can provide a meaningful impact on the church's shared mission, as much as what churches can expect from completely novel patterns of collective efforts.

In order to create the quadrantal table above, two primary characteristics of cooperative parishes were considered: (a) The way that the identity of participating congregations is defined and (b) the motivation by which the cooperative ministry is initiated and thrust. Some forms of cooperative parish consolidate the identity of the congregations within it through merger or by putting one new name on the sign. Some other forms, on the other hand, maintain the particular identity of each congregation while they together pursue a common goal and vision. There are also several ways of cooperation that are compelled by the needs of churches or communities. In many cases, the needs stem from desperation, but the need for an expanded community often motivates cooperation as well. Meanwhile, there are forms of cooperative parishes that are implemented in the pursuit of, as Urban names it, a "Gifts-Based Ministry System."[5] In other

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[4] Kay L. Kotan and Jason C. Stanley, *An Effective Approach to Cooperative Parishes: A Congregational Guide to Discernment and Implementation* (Knoxville: Market Square Books, 2022), 15-16.

[5] Judith A. Urban, *New Life Through Shared Ministry: Moving from Volunteering to Mission* (Herndon: The Alban Institute, 2013), 150.

words, some cooperation models start with asking, "What is needed?" while other forms of cooperative parish emanate from asking, "What can be shared?"

A. Merger

First, merger is a form of cooperative parish that is initiated when churches present shared needs and eventually decide to combine into one shared identity as a result. Through mergers, congregations come to incorporate their outward personalities, including their resources, locations, and names. While a merger can be a simple way to expect multiplying two or more entities as one greater body, its perception is usually not as optimistic as it could possibly be. In reality, a merger is commonly acknowledged as the last resort of declining churches. When churches merge in a conventional manner, one or more existing congregations dissolve into another church. Since the process can be seen as the death of one side, congregations typically resist when decisions of a merger come to their attention. The UMC's unique structure and procedure create an even more particular sentiment toward the conversation. In the UMC, the final decision for a merger is held in the authority of the denominational body—the DS approves the plan, and the Annual Conference ratifies it.[6] While the plan has to be proposed and initiated by the Charge Conference, it is in many cases, the DS, whose primary role is the "chief missional strategist of the district," sees the need first and encourages dwindling congregations to start the discernment.[7] Such plans are often received as a top-down attempt for a church closure and thus create an emotional obstacle to a healthy and strategic dialogue toward cooperation.

An interview with the leaders from Wesley United Methodist Church (WUMC) provided

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[6] *Book of Discipline*, ¶2546.1.
[7] Ibid., ¶419.1.

worthwhile insights about conventional mergers. I personally had a chance to serve as the lead pastor of WUMC when the church received two other congregations—Epiphany United Methodist Church (EUMC) in 2018 and Charles Wesley United Methodist Church (CWUMC) in 2020. All three churches were located within 3 to 7 miles of each other, sharing an affluent suburban community in Northern Virginia. In spite of minor differences in the details of their stories and timelines, the journeys of EUMC and CWUMC resemble each other. Both mergers were motivated by a series of conversations with the district office. It was a painful conversation, but the congregations had time for a thorough exploration of options available, including book study and neighboring church visits. After two years of discernment, they eventually decided to take the next step by starting a new ministry with another church.

It is noteworthy that the churches were given ample amount time to explore and learn the people of WUMC. In the lengthy process of both mergers, they equally felt the strongest sense of belonging to the WUMC congregation, as the church intentionally offered relevant experiences of small groups or made leadership positions available.[8] Due to geographic proximities, the three congregations also shared similar demographics. As their characteristics, interests, and desires largely overlap, the transition over time was made smooth.

Meanwhile, the leaders pointed out that the greatest challenge also came from people. Even after several years since the mergers, there are still invisible lines between the groups based on people's congregations of origin.[9] This phenomenon is not unusual, and Nash et al. call it subgrouping. There are power dynamics that are inevitable when groups work together. To name a few, members may subgroup (creating groups in a group), scapegoat (blaming others for

[8] Jiyeon Kim, Gail Rosner, and Tylee Smith, interview with the author, November 14, 2024.
[9] Kim, Rosner, and Smith, interview.

venting anxieties), rescue (triangularization of relationship), or groupthink (overly prioritizing the group over individuals).[10] These negative relationship patterns are extremely hard to avoid unless every member of the group in collaboration uniformly agrees with the purpose.

That means, as in all other forms of cooperative parish, the more important question for merger is 'why,' rather than 'how' or in 'what' forms congregations combine. Tomberlin and Bird compared some successful or failed church merger cases and analyzed their common characteristics. A merger done for the sake of prolonging the congregation's weakened heartbeat, which they call an "ICU merger," will not leave a lasting impact.[11] It is when a merger is missionally and strategically put into action that the decision bears the fruit of a renewed identity.[12] Common Table is one great example. Located in Richmond, Virginia, Common Table gave its birth as a coalescence of two individual congregations. In 2019, Boulevard United Methodist Church decided to buy a building in downtown Richmond for its thriving ministry. As soon as they signed the contract in February 2020, however, the Covid-19 pandemic shut down everything. After reopening, the church did not fully recover, and only a handful of worshipers struggled to maintain the newly obtained massive building. On the other hand, Center Church was a new church plant in the same area. They had strength in connection and evangelism, growing fast to the extent of feeling the need for their own space. That was exactly when Pastor Drew of Boulevard and Pastor Steven of Center Church met at a community rally. The two pastors soon discovered that their congregations have strong common ground in ministries of social justice and the theology of Holy Communion. After prayerful discernment, they decided to form a new congregation together, and now they are one church, Common Table, worshiping in

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[10] Sally Nash, Jo Pimlott, and Paul Nash, *Skills for Collaborative Ministry* (London: SPCK, 2008), 27-31.
[11] Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird, *Better Together: Making Church Mergers Work* (Jossey-Bass, Hoboken: 2012), 12, 31-32.
[12] Ibid., xix.

the building that Boulevard offered and growing through the power of connection Center Church brought forth.[13]

As the cases of WUMC and Common Table display, when creatively and thoughtfully implemented, a merger can be a good means to form a cooperative parish. If congregations are willing to redefine their identity with others in the same need, they can take the best advantage of this self-giving process, as a merger can provide the most direct and immediate way to consolidate available resources. They can also recalibrate their assets through a merger, which will also increase ministry capacity. As Carey Nieuwhof restated Jim Tomberlin's idea after interviewing him, although forced mergers mainly feel tragic, an intentional merging can bring about a new momentum by making one plus one more than two.[14] However, its approach has to be careful and intentional. Mergers can easily become an emotional process, and thus, power struggles and relationship dynamics have to be carefully treated. Such provision can be a time-consuming procedure, and thus, for a healthy practice of merger, it is crucial to allow sufficient time to support discernment and to manage its aftermath.

B. Multi-Location Ministry

A merger is one way of creating a cooperative ministry by combining the identity of two or more churches. And yet, shared identity does not necessarily mean congregants would share one exact location. While congregations or groups work under one church sign, they may operate in multiple locations, not to address the shared needs of the congregations but to share gifts that each of them can collectively offer. That can be another model of cooperative parish, which can

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[13] Drew Wilson, interview with the author, November 20, 2024.

[14] Carey Nieuwhof, "Interview with Jim Tomberlin and Warren Bird," Carey Nieuwhof, last modified September 12, 2020, accessed October 25, 2024, https://www.google.com/policies/privacy/.https://careynieuwhof.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CNLP_367-%E2%80%93With_Jim-Tomberlin-and-Warren-Bird.pdf.

be named multi-location ministry.

Multi-location ministry is a common practice. Usually, it begins as a satellite site of relatively large congregations. Floris United Methodist Church (FUMC), when it was fast growing in Herndon, Virginia, decided to extend its mission to a thriving location in Reston, Virginia, where the community rarely saw a United Methodist presence. Later, they made another site in Loudoun County, another neighboring community of FUMC. The ministry specifically aimed to provide a place for the reluctant population to enter a typical church building, like what FUMC was then becoming. The strategy was straightforward: FUMC provides resources, and the site locations would provide connections and innovative ministries. And they jointly discern vision and strategy as one church.

For that reason, even from the planning phase of the locations, the leadership was very intentional about creating a culture of independence for the newly bred ministries. They named the location separately Restoration and decided that Restoration would not aim to own a typical church building but to strive to be a third place for the seekers and doubters. The catchphrase of Restoration echoes the vision, which reads, “Not just another church.”[15] While Restoration worships in a local elementary school, FUMC commits itself to offering larger spaces whenever Restoration locations need a place for big gatherings.

Pastor Daniel Park of Restoration in Reston says that the dedicated relationship between FUMC and Restoration was a critical ingredient for the success of this cooperative effort. Restoration’s ability to utilize established resources of a large church, such as mission statement, strategy, worship planning, shared finance, leadership structure, staff, and properties, was a key element of the church’s growth. Even during the Covid pandemic, as a result of which the

[15] Daniel Park, interview with the author, October 10, 2024.

Loudoun location had to close, the power of supportive partnership was what other emerging ministries did not possess. Park shares that this particular structure has also created a unique challenge over time. Despite the leadership's deliberate efforts to acknowledge both locations as one church, over time, the congregation's perception is made prone to seeing Restoration as "that little cute church." Pastor Park admits that there were moments he felt as if Restoration seemed more like leadership's vision rather than a congregational movement.[16]

The work of The Nett United Methodist Church in Gwinnett County, Georgia, presents another approach to multi-location ministries. Unlike FUMC-Restoration, The Nett, as the name stands for Nations Experiencing Transformation Together, purposefully started as a ministry of diversity. There is no 'center' location for The Nett; the relationship between campuses seems more horizontal. The Nett has four locations—three worship centers and one shared mission campus—and each campus is committed to representing its surrounding community. Worship centers intentionally offer different worship styles, especially following their own demographics. The Nett acquired every building through a purchase of a closed UMC property.[17]

One impressive characteristic of The Nett is their intentional dedication to the community. The Nett strategically defines its mission field to the boundary of Gwinnett County. Every site is located within the county line, meaning they share the same school district, deal with one local government, and can identify shared goals for the greater community when they envision a large-scale mission project. This sense of deeper commitment to the community distinguishes multi-location ministry as a cooperative parish from standard practices of satellite site expansions. Dr. Blair points out that the emerging paradigm of the church has recently

[16] Park, interview.
[17] Woo J. Kang, interview with the author, September 19, 2024.

developed a mission strategy that redefines the sense of community beyond geographic areas.[18] When churches breed a satellite location, they typically consider a completely differentiated region—a different county or state. That way, churches can embrace a new 'market,' maximizing the potential for evangelism throughout the expansion. But it is ironically the denominational system that has persistently maintained churches' geographical attention.[19] Through districts, dioceses, or conferences, while these practices somehow slowed down adaptations or innovations, established denominations have conversely made excellent investments for the specific community they serve. As Walljasper puts it, this immediate and intimate community is "a powerful but most often overlooked tool" for transforming a larger society and its members.[20]

United Methodist clergy are frequently reminded that their appointment is not just to a church but to the greater community. When multi-location ministry is purposefully planned as a cooperative parish model, as in the stories of FUMC-Restoration and The Nett, it can provide one of the most effective ways—and often the most efficient—to strengthen the church's commitment to the community. The method allows churches to nimble strategies, too, especially based on the characteristics of specific locations they serve, and as needed, churches can converge or pool their resources for the best outcome toward their shared vision.

As much, however, this cooperation model requires considerate attention to the role of participating congregations. Ideally, a cooperative parish is a means to transition from the predominant contributions of an entity or individual to the collaborative work of the entire group. That is, cooperative ministry is expected to evolve into something that is "of the people" rather

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[18] Anthony L. Blair, *Church and Academy in Harmony: Models of Collaboration for the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 41-42.
[19] Ibid., 41.
[20] Jay Walljasper, *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 120.

than merely "for the people."[21] Practically, however, there is a significant risk that the outcome may veer in the opposite direction, getting one side heavily yoked and the whole cooperation impaired by the vertical relationship. In the context of multi-location ministry, the ownership of cooperation must be equally emphasized across the locations so that members will focus on the purpose instead of the amount of contribution or the initiative of one body over the others.

C. Multi-Point Charge

As stated above, multi-point charges are the primary form of cooperative parish in the UMC. When churches struggle for years, the most general strategy of the denomination is to group congregations into one charge. Typically, this is a means to resolve appointment issues. By clustering churches with the same needs—primarily financial need as they cannot afford a full-time clergy by themselves—churches jointly receive a clergy leader with a good credential, and the denomination resolves concerns about clergy appointment, of which they take the responsibility of guaranteed appointment based on the BOD.[22] Nevertheless, in this model, congregations do not ultimately unify their identity. Although they are grouped as one charge, churches operate independently with separate signs. They often have their own mission statement, church budget (aside from the collective charge budget), or leadership slate. The appointed clergy is frequently the only element that glues the churches together. As Hoover's study proves, there is an inevitable need for a person to intermediate when groups with different cultural backgrounds work together.[23] In the case of multi-point charge, it is the pastor, or the person responsible for pastoral leadership.

Due to such nature, multi-point charge is more commonly practiced in rural areas, where

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[21] Nash, Pimlott, and Nash, *Skills for Collaborative Ministry*, 5-6.
[22] *Book of Discipline*, ¶425.ff.
[23] Brett C. Hoover, *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 137.

the amount of available resources steadily shrinks. In this environment, not only churches but the entire community are struggling with consistent decline. In that context, Rev. Eungil Cho is serving across small towns in New Hampshire, where he is appointed to a seven-point charge as a solo pastor. According to him, the first thing he had to do as a clergy leader of this unheard number of churches was to figure out what could bind them together.[24]

De Young et al. analyze the struggle in the early Christian community, especially regarding the contention between different ideals for Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul's belief was apparent that all must become one church. Still, unity was not a simple task. People needed something that could hold the community as one. And most frequently, the chance is in the very foundation of the community's identity. For the early church, it was faith.[25] The bottom line for Rev. Cho's cooperative parish was that churches identified themselves as a worshiping community. Instead of expanding ministry areas, Cho made worship the center of the connection. He formed a 'preaching team' across the seven churches. He equips the team members so that every church can have worship experiences with a consistent theme led by a decent worship leader on Sundays, while he can only preach at two churches every weekend. They also had joint worship service every quarter and over the summer, which churches have not seen an event of this size for a long time.[26]

The principle with which Rev. Angela Rotherham leads her six-point charge is equivalent. The difference in her context is that, compared to Cho's, Rotherham serves in relatively more lively towns in Maine, and she has a part-time associate pastor to assist her. Due to this additional pastoral coverage, worship is not the greatest urgency for the ministry of her

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[24] Eungil Cho, interview with the author, September 25, 2024.
[25] Curtiss Paul De Young et al., *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26, 35-37.
[26] Cho, interview.

cooperation. Her focus area has been a combined bible study group. The congregations shared the need for human connection and viable small groups, while they were isolated as diminishing faith communities. Now, the newly formed study group of people from six different towns jointly has over six times as many members as what groups respectively had in previous years. The pastors collaboratively create their curriculum, which adds unique taste and quality to the experience of the participants, who only had quarter-time pastors for over a decade.[27]

Marvin Judy's research on rural communities is noteworthy. According to him, one can categorize the locality groups in the nonmetropolitan area into three notable sociological layers. First, a rural neighborhood is where people's close interactions and strong bonds with each other take place. Rural community is a broader social group where residents share interests and social structures. Last, enlarged community is the boundary that politics and geographics occur in.[28] While the more extensive layer is more influential to the life of the members, people's attention is generally confined to the narrow concepts of community. When multi-point charge comes into play, one of the most significant advantages is that churches, which previously operated based on a narrow definition of community, expansively redefine their understanding of it. Congregations come to widen their understanding of the mission field across the cooperation, and thus, can move from the competition spirit between towns to the holistic transformation of a larger community. In the process, churches also come to identify their core ministry passion. By recalibrating their limited resources, congregations can cooperatively focus on more foundational and impactful opportunities to serve the community.

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[27] Angela Rotherham, interview with the author, November 20, 2024.

[28] Marvin T. Judy, *The Cooperative Parish in Nonmetropolitan Areas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 31-33.

However, the question is whether these efforts can practically help faith communities revitalize and turn around. Unfortunately, the most common reality is that multi-point charges are merely a means to resolve immediate issues with appointments, and a long-range transformation rarely happens.[29] Clergy burnout is another risk that multi-point charges have to pay attention to. While burnout of leaders could be a common risk for many forms of collaboration, its impact will be mainly negative to multi-point charges since, as stated above, pastoral leadership is the only element that holds the churches together in this model. Rotherham emphasized several times that, in this extensive appointment context, the pastor's role needs to be realistically redefined as a circuit-riding director rather than a sole doer at the scene.[30] This mindset transformation can be a radical concept for the congregants, and pastors will need support from the denomination. When the UMC leadership strategically plan a multi-point charge, it is critical to build congregational support and capability as much as it is to identify fine pastoral leadership.

D. Ministry Hub

The last quadrant of cooperative parish models is where churches share their unique gifts while each congregation keeps its particular identity. In society, conversations about the sharing economy are no longer a strange subject. In a world where the market economy pretends to be the sole standard for measurement, creating a space for more sustainable, effective, and communal means to utilize resources is a refreshing topic. Attention to the commons also comes from such environments. As Walljasper puts it, the commons is "a wealth of valuable assets that belong to everyone."[31] The fourth cooperative parish model is an ecclesiological version of the

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[29] Kay L. Kotan, personal coaching session with the author, November 25, 2024.
[30] Rotherham, interview.
[31] Walljasper, *All That We Share*, 2-3.

commons. In this paper, I would name it ministry hub, as churches will collectively do ministries through and around this cooperation.

An interview with the leader of a Missional HUB at the Holston Annual Conference of the UMC, which encircles the Appalachian mountains region in Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia, offered meaningful perspectives. In this case, HUB is an acronym that indicates three virtues they are pursuing, which represent hope (a starting point), unity (the goal of cooperation), and blessing (an outcome of unity). Initiated by the conference leadership, it started as an effort to group churches for missional goals. In the HUB that Rev. Scott Spence is leading in southwest Virginia, four participating congregations are all different in terms of demographics, size, and culture. Spence explains the way that the HUB functions briefly as being separation in administration and joint for strategy.[32]

Congregations individually exist as independent churches. They have their own mission goal, leadership, budget, and day-to-day ministries. However, when there is a more considerable need for a mission, they function as one cooperative group. For a recent flood that devastated the community, to develop an international mission connection with Kenya, or to provide a homeless hypothermia shelter, they collaborated and accomplished their goals together. Pastors, a group of full diversity—a middle-aged white male, a young African American, and a part-time female—are core instruments for the cooperation. Still, they are separately appointed to one of the churches, and the clergy shares the pulpits in rotation. The joint mission projects represent the strength of each clergyperson, too. Kenya is the mother country of the African American clergy, the homeless mission is the passion of the female pastor, and the church that Spence leads, a middle-aged male pastor, takes the initiative of sizable mission projects with its relatively ample

[32] Scott Spence, interview with the author, November 6, 2024.

financial resources.

This cooperative model reflects Paul's metaphor of the church as one body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. In his ecclesiological claim, Paul says each part has its strength, while they serve one purpose as one body. While his original assertion was about a church and its members, once we expand this analogy to the cooperative hub and its member churches, the formula also becomes a powerful application of connectional and collaborative nature. Indeed, many congregations struggle to duplicate the bandwidth of ministries that other churches also do—worship, mission, generosity, care, education, senior care, next generations, and so much more. It is similar to an eye trying to function as a leg, nose, and hand, as in Paul's metaphor. In such a reality, a ministry hub can provide a thriving ecosystem where the entire body collectively continues to grow and accomplish a more excellent vision together. At the same time, each part plays its own role to its best. I also believe this particular quadrant of the cooperative parish model is the most underutilized form and thus contains the most significant potential in the future UMC context.

Mark Elsdon, to illustrate the role of church property within the community, uses an analogy of "stone soup" in a children's tale. In this story, a group of pilgrims begin to cook in a public square in a pot only with stones in water. Out of curiosity and support, community members autonomously bring some ingredients. One after another, the soup, starting only with rocks and water, eventually becomes a nice soup to feed everyone. Elsdon asks if a church building can be a stone in the pot for the larger community.[33] And this is my question: Can ministry hub as a cooperative parish be that stone, as churches bring small but precious gifts to add to accomplish their collective mission? This question is where the idea of my innovation

[33] Mark Elsdon, "What Happens When Churches Are Gone?," *Gone for Good?: Negotiating the Coming Wave of Church Property Transition, ed. Mark Elsdon* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2024), 7-8.

project stems from. The following project has been a powerful exploratory effort for the six churches in the Woodbridge area. I expect that the project will provide helpful insight into the ecclesiology of the United Methodist connectionalism for the coming generations.

Innovation Project: Woodbridge Collective

A. Context

My current congregation, Old Bridge United Methodist Church (OBUMC), is in Woodbridge, Virginia. Woodbridge is an area that encompasses five ZIP codes, composed of multiple Home Owners' Associations, which often shape how residents identify themselves. One notable dynamic of Woodbridge is the disparity of economic, ethnic, and/or social identities across the community. Accordingly, there are clear separations between neighborhoods. Some areas present a high level of needs, while others possess abundant resources with minimal demand for them.

There are six United Methodist congregations in the greater Woodbridge area, and OBUMC is one of them. Each church is located in a different neighborhood; thus, they have different sets of 'needs to meet' and 'gifts to offer.' On the one hand, this could be a significant challenge for fruitful ministry. With the unmatched distribution of resources and needs, churches often experience difficulties in identifying where to start their mission. On the other hand, however, such an environment also provides a unique opportunity, especially when churches are open to working cooperatively. An enlarged mission field filled with combined resources can provide untapped potential to the mission of every church.

Among the six churches, half are facing serious difficulties with finance. A couple of congregations have even had nonpublic conversations about their next step, including a potential decision for a merger or closure. Despite challenges, at the given moment, churches are

maintaining their properties and trying to continue their service to the community to the extent their capability would allow. As a result, each church has borne certain fruits in ministry. For instance, OBUMC has the most vital youth ministry within the area. Whilst some churches in the area do not even have a youth ministry, the youth group at OBUMC has grown from 6 to 25 in the last one and a half years. Meanwhile, Bethel United Methodist Church is a center for the regional Emmaus community, a spiritual retreat group caring for the people in the Northern Virginia area. Prince of Peace United Methodist Church runs a small but vital food pantry, and Cokesbury United Methodist Church offers a community garden for the neighborhood. Every ministry is impactful. The truth is just that not every church needs to do everything.

B. Purpose

Among the four possible applications of the cooperative parish in the previous chapter, the fourth quadrant model, ministry hub, is the best method for the context of the UMC congregations in Woodbridge. Since all six churches can autonomously support their own life and ministries, they have no desperate intention to merge or combine with other congregations anytime soon. What primarily needs to be done for the vitality of this cooperation is, therefore, 'connecting the dots.'

The expectation is that this effort will allow the participating churches to experience the impact of cooperative ministries. By working together, churches will explore the ways: (1) to streamline their ministries and concentrate on their own very best signature ministries that leave the most significant impact, (2) to identify a larger goal and collectively contribute toward it, and (3) to connect the resource in one side of the larger community to the blinded needs in another part of the area. These goals, however, is an effort to identify practical goals in preparing a greater future plan. The discussion does not attempt to develop an unrealistic fantasy or produce

an immediate outcome.

In other words, this innovation aims to implement an exploratory stage of collaboration toward future cooperation. Kotan and Stanley distinguish the definition of a cooperative parish from the ministries in collaboration. According to them, while collaboration refers to 'work' that two or more churches do together, cooperation has its emphasis on shared 'vision' as congregations make mutual efforts toward it.[34] While collaboration and cooperation are distinctive concepts, the leaders of participating churches in Woodbridge Collective—this is a tentative title—believe that well-planned collaborations can function as a novice step toward a more solid form of cooperative ministry to come.

C. Design

Fergusson et al. point out that there are steps of development when groups or individuals carry out one big idea. It starts with exchanging information and knowledge—'connection.' When trust is founded throughout the first stage, then 'coordination.' Groups start acting in concert and mutual comprehension in this step. Coordination is followed by 'cooperation' and then 'collaboration,' which is the final goal of the entire process.[35] The way they define cooperation and collaboration is almost the opposite of Kotan and Stanley's perspective. Fergusson et al. see collaboration as the more solid and advanced form of working jointly, while Kotan and Stanley, as noted above, envision cooperation as the ultimate stage of the process.

Still, Fergusson et al.'s proposal to mature the cooperation through a step-by-step process is notable. Since I have adopted the vocabulary from Kotan and Stanley's research throughout this paper, I slightly modified Fergusson et al.'s illustration to sketch the innovation project.

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[34] Kotan and Stanley, *An Effective Approach*, 39-40.

[35] Dave Ferguson, Jon Ferguson, and Eric Bramlett, *The Big Idea: Aligning the Ministries of Your Church through Creative Collaboration* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 165-167.

Woodbridge Collective has been implemented in four major steps: connection, coordination, collaboration, and cooperation. More specifically, the work of the partnership takes place via Relationship Building (connection), Experimental Project (coordination), Collaborative Innovation (collaboration), and prospective Cooperative Mission (cooperation).

Application

A. Connection: Relationship Building

In the process of a successful ministry of collaboration and/or cooperation, overly emphasizing the importance of trust is hardly possible. The capitalistic ideal of the society has imposed a spirit of competition even among the Christian communities, and the tendency feels even worse within the UMC environment, as previously explained. For the sake of the predictable and stable operation of the institution, many organized denominations, including the UMC, have adopted a hierarchical mindset as their working principle. This mindset, as much as it helps clarify the procedures and the point of accountability, conversely limits the autonomy and transparency of control.[36] The system can easily ignore the stories of each individual, and the flexibility level gets compromised. However, collaboration and cooperation is a process that requires a significant amount of vulnerability. As Blair points out, to cultivate a thriving culture of collaboration, it is necessary to reimagine the relationship between participating groups positively. They initially come as strangers, but the transformation of collaboration takes place when those strangers begin to perceive each other as fellow pilgrims.[37]

The series of meetings and details started on a regular basis. Pastors met every other week, but for the first whole year, there was literally no agenda. It was intentional that the

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[36] David Ehrilchman, *Impact Networks: Create Connection, Spark Collaboration, and Catalyze Systemic Change* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2021), 32-33.
[37] Blair, *Church and Academy*, 116.

leaders made the meetings unintentional. By sharing life and stories, we invested enough time to convince each other that being together would not be a dangerous decision. This process was invaluable and essential. Judith Urban writes about the importance of affirmation in the collaboration process. As she claims, affirmation requires efforts beyond simple appreciation or recognition. While appreciation is a reaction to one's *doing*, affirmation focuses on the *being*. Throughout affirmation, each and every one is acknowledged that they are an essential part of the togetherness.[38] Without this perception, it is hard to see 'us' beyond 'you and me.'

This process requires time and patience. I have to admit that I was very fortunate to be in my current context with the other five pastors I am working with. Many were already friends, and even those who came on board later were adaptive and flexible leaders with no fear of learning or trying something new. However, that does not mean congregations saw the innovation in the same way. Most leadership was concerned whether this would not negatively impact the vitality of their congregation. Many asked the question, "Who is going to take the credit?" and worried about circumstances that a family in their membership finds another church more attractive and eventually leaves them to join a new one. One day, pastors were sharing these shared yet not-verbalized questions while we were roughly discussing the collaboration project. A pastor shared how he responded: "I said, 'That will be great. Everyone deserves a church where they can joyfully grow as a disciple.' If my members say they are going to your church, I will gladly send them forth with blessings." And everyone at the table agreed wholeheartedly. That was the tipping point of our conversation. It convinced our level of trust in each other, as well as the truth that we share the same goal to serve the Church with 'capital C.'

B. Experimental Coordination: Confirmation Class and Holy Week

[38] Urban, *New Life*, 116-117.

When the relationship building was complete, it was time to discern experimental projects. According to Fergusson et al.'s description of stages, it is the coordination phase. Notably, the authors characterized it as a step to prevent problematic issues.[39] Executing some piloting ministries may not guarantee the success of the entire cooperation project, but it can help churches see matters expected as they continue to work together, as well as how to deal with possible problems ahead.

Pastors identified some 'low-hanging fruits' to start the innovation. A couple of characteristics were considered when naming the first projects. First, we sought temporary events, meaning that it is a one-time event, as opposed to being steady. This would lower the anxiety level of participating congregations, as people could expect when it starts and ends. Also, leaders tried to identify universal events or ministries—namely, things that all six churches were doing or trying to do. Shared interest was to ensure collaboration is a good addition to what congregations are doing instead of being something brand new and thus intimidating.

That was how Confirmation Class became the first project in 2023. For this, churches jointly made a list of confirmation candidates, naming 18 students from 4 churches. All the pastors created a 10-week curriculum, including two field trips—one to a synagogue and the other to the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. Six pastors taught 12 sessions in rotation. In addition to that, to strengthen the connection and deepen the experience, we designed it for confirmands to visit all six churches on Sunday mornings. Hosting churches were committed to recognizing and praying for them during the service. On Confirmation Sunday, students were confirmed at their home church, and yet, the entire list of confirmation classes was to be acknowledged, naming everyone as one class.

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[39] Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *Big Idea*, 167.

Then, in 2024, we created a collaborative, emerging Holy Thursday worship experience. Rather than a traditional Communion service, a series of prayer stations, where worship participants could experience the theological themes of the Last Supper in a multi-sensory way—Take, Break, Bless, and Give. Four pastors participated, and each took leadership in one station. Based on positive feedback, for the upcoming Lent 2025, we are expanding this collaboration to a greater extent. Four congregations will respectively host a Maundy Thursday Communion Service, Good Friday Tenebrae, Holy Saturday Prayer Vigil, and Easter Sunrise Worship. The other two churches, which do not have enough space or human power to prepare a worship of such size, still participate in services and support the preparation of each service throughout the week.

C. Innovative Collaboration 1: Youth Collaborate

One of the significant outcomes of the collative Confirmation Class was a strengthened connection between younger families. These efforts affirmed that churches have more common ground than differences or reasons for competition. Several families in the confirmation class found out that their kids were attending the same school, playing in the same sports league, or living in the same neighborhood. It was natural progress that the collaboration took the next step by collectively offering a combined youth group.

This collaboration project also serves as a initial step for the ministry hub cooperative parish model, designed to uphold each congregation's unique gift. In this model, while collective intelligence and capabilities contribute to the shared goal, each congregation would expect to nurture their own signature ministries. As previously noted, OBUMC has the greatest strength in youth ministry among the six churches. It results from various factors, including good staff leadership, the neighborhood's personality, the church's partnership and proximity with local

schools, and generous budget support. The leadership of Woodbridge Collective decided to make good use of the momentum, and so, made OBUMC the host site of collaborative youth, along with the support from the other five congregations. The group meets every weekend, creating a group of 45 kids from every part of the Woodbridge area, mostly gathering at OBUMC but occasionally meeting at other locations, too, especially for special events or mission projects. Members of all six churches plan to support food and chaperones, and leaders from participating congregations teach the class in rotation for a shared curriculum.

Collaborative youth group is a form of joint ministry in many other places. However, the impact this ministry made on Woodbridge Collective was meaningful since it was the first event that churches did together on a regular basis. Doing things consistently requires constant attention and commitment, and, therefore, is an essential step for the groups to develop a shared ministry. In his study of church leadership, Sims warns of the risks that "lack of repeatability" can impose. His original assertion is that when a work is not repeated enough by people in a way they can internalize it, the entire group will end up being dependent on one single heroic figure, which will eventually harm the life of the church.[40] The same logic can be applied to cooperative parishes. If collaboration only pursues some temporary and one-off events, the sustainability of the whole project will go astray soon.

Along with this project's contribution to the entire cooperation, it was also an opportunity to learn a hard lesson: As much as leaders discuss vision and plans, it is critical for the ministry's success to discuss shared accountability openly. There were moments, especially during busy seasons in the fall, when the leaders and parents of other youth groups simply dropped their kids off at the site and stopped participating in the group's support. Staff and volunteers at OBUMC

[40] Bryan D. Sims, *Leading Together: The Holy Possibility of Harmony and Synergy in the Face of Change* (Cody: 100 Movements Publishing, 2022), 25-26.

felt they were merely given extended childcare duty, while the season was equally challenging to them. It took us a series of vulnerable communications to realign the collaborative mindset and get the momentum back on track.

In collaboration, clarifying the shared duties and boundaries in the planning process is crucial since compromised accountability in the middle of the process can undermine the entire cooperation. In the context of collaboration, trust means believing that everyone will do what they promised to do, and thus, it is a critical ingredient of the success of the work.[41] Trust is also a compound of shared responsibility and loving relationships.[42] In addition to honest conversations on accountability, it takes time, intentionality, and vulnerability to build and maintain trust.

D. Innovative Collaboration 2: Pulpit Swap

The next idea that Woodbridge Collective adopted was a creative yet colossal step forward. The first three events and activities only targeted a limited timeframe or specific groups. At this point, however, the leaders of the collaboration decided to expand its bandwidth by planning another activity involving Sunday worship services, and thus, the general congregation—an innovative idea for a pulpit swap. All pastors would rotate all six churches while preaching on a shared series. The series, entitled 'Re:Reading Wesley,' was designed to rewrite the masterpiece sermons of John Wesley. This choice was intentional, as the clergy leaders wanted to promote this collaboration as an effort to reclaim our tradition of connectionalism. When pastors visited other churches, they came with a lay leader from their congregation, too. It was in an effort to develop a sustainable connection, instead of creating a

[41] Ferguson, Ferguson, and Bramlett, *Big Idea*, 173-174.
[42] Sims, *Leading Together*, 40, 45.

clergy-dependent—and thus possibly temporary and fragile—form of weak coalition.

Accordingly, the pulpit swap was an essential step for a stronger cooperation of Woodbridge Collective. Worship service is one of the most common yet diversified experiences across every congregation. Every church offers Sunday services at similar times. For most churches and their members, corporate worship is the core component of their religious life. In addition, many churches assess their ministry's vitality mainly by the worship attendance numbers on Sunday mornings. Hoover, therefore, calls the worship ministry congregation's "identity marker."[43] Worship experience shapes congregational life, and it also often defines the characteristics of each faith community. The aspect of such attributes includes but is not limited to the language used, the pattern of liturgy, space setup and music preference, and the way people dress up for worship and other events. Experiencing such differences across Woodbridge Collective was enlightening rather than comparative for each congregation. The greatest lesson from the innovation was, as reflected in the assessment conversation between clergy and lay leadership, that cooperation is about differences between the participating congregations as much as the common ground they share. The experience reassured participating churches that the ultimate goal of cooperation is the pursuit of fruitful unity instead of creating simple uniformity.

Another lesson congregations learn from this innovation is that, for cooperation, trust is the foundation, and fun keeps it going. In order to decrease the level of congregational anxiety, the pastors decided to bring an inflatable horse head. The horse head served as a reminder of our shared Methodist roots, as in the circuit riders in old Methodism, who rode on a horse and traveled across towns to preach. However, it was not just a symbol but appeared as a source of laughter every Sunday, which bonded churches as one group throughout the six-week process.

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[43] Hoover, *The Shared Parish*, 79-80.

The visiting clergy and congregations took a selfie every week and posted it on social media, using the same materials and wordings provided by the OBUMC Communication Team, which is the only professional communication group within the Collaboration. This communication method also became another example of the impact of sharing resources, acknowledging that each congregation has its unique gift to offer for the good of the entire cooperation.

On an additional note, this particular innovation project drew the attention of the Virginia Annual Conference. The Conference Communication Team visited to interview participating clergy leaders and promoted the effort to other United Methodist congregations in Virginia. As a result, a couple more groups of congregations are currently planning to replicate the efforts that Woodbridge Collective has initiated.

E. Ongoing Cooperation: Cooperative Mission Project

The projects Woodbridge Collective has done are a great start. But by any means, they are nothing close to the destination of the entire innovation. Every collaborative effort has a bigger goal of creating cooperation, and healthy cooperation requires, as noted earlier, a shared vision. Identifying a vision that the members of the cooperation agree upon completes a cooperative parish's legitimacy and works as a stone in the stone soup.

While congregations focus on their special gifts and strengths by using the increased critical mass and momentum that the collaboration offers, this cooperation model also pursues higher goals together. By identifying a core mission project, congregations strengthen their unity, contribute to a greater good, and expect a continued transformation of their mission mindset. Ehrlichman writes about the network mindset, as opposed to the hierarchical mindset. When organizations work with a hierarchical mindset, typically described as a pyramid structure, their decisions and focus become organization-centered. They can sacrifice their mission for the

system. On the other hand, when the network mindset becomes the core value of the group, depicted as an interwoven spider web-looking relationship, members put purpose at the center, and the organization becomes one piece of the web, essential yet not superior.[44] And it is when purpose holds the churches together that cooperation begins to bear distinctive fruit, which one cannot imagine without togetherness.

A few potential mission goals are currently being considered, and one example, which is also one of the most probable targets, is affordable housing. Woodbridge is presently seeing a considerably spiking number of homeless neighbors in the area, as reflected in the 35% increase in homelessness across the entire county in 2023.[45] Local governments and charity groups are operating at least five sizable shelters or centers, and yet, homelessness remains a topic that requires significant attention from the members of the community.[46] Meanwhile, as Elsdon writes, affordable housing is genuinely one innovative approach to let church buildings contribute to the greater good while the congregation obtains resources for its continued mission.[47] Recently, churches in Virginia have also heard the story of Central United Methodist Church, which renovated its traditional property into an affordable residential building in collaboration with the county government and nonprofit organizations.[48] A project of such a kind may be a path to consider for a couple of churches in Woodbridge whose financial struggle is

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[44] Ehrilchman, *Impact Networks*, 40-42.

[45] Anya Sczerzenie, "Homelessness up 35% in Prince William County as COVID Supports," *Prince William Times*, July 28, 2023, accessed January 3, 2025, https://www.princewilliamtimes.com/news/homelessness-up-35-in-prince-william-county-as-covid-supports-end/article_f3c41d8c-2d80-11ee-81dd-371e7a9a4aab.html.

[46] "Emergency Shelters," Prince William County, accessed January 3, 2025, https://www.pwcva.gov/department/social-services/homeless-and-winter-shelters.

[47] Elsdon, "What Happens," 11.

[48] Julie Carey, "Arlington Church, Nonprofit Create Affordable Housing with Faith-Based Development," *NBC4 News Washington*, April 16, 2024, accessed December 22, 2024, https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/northern-virginia/arlington-church-nonprofit-create-affordable-housing-with-faith-based-development/3594136/.

particularly weighty. It is a difficult discernment to make. However, it will not be 'their' story to discern. Instead, if that ever has to happen to any congregation within the cooperation, it will be a divine call for all six churches in the cooperative connection to serve together.

Assessment

The way that Woodbridge Collective developed its collaborative model suggests one remarkable example of how the UMC congregations can start adopting cooperative parish ministry as their potential future. It all started at a local Panera Bread as pastors gathered regularly and built trust and *connection*. Then, they *coordinated* approachable exploratory events with which interested folks could foretaste the cooperation. *Collaboration* through regular events and worship services convinced the model's sustainability and engaged lay leadership. Now, participating churches envision more significant *cooperation*. We are in this together in good times and even in potentially bad times. And it is 'we'—not even 'you and me.'

This ministry hub model is particularly empowering when it comes to its relatability to a vital movement within the denomination. In the UMC context, there is a ministry initiative called Fresh Expressions. Initially, fresh expressions started as an innovation to reach out to those not connected to conventional churches. By creating a gathering space and opportunity, not necessarily 'in' the church building but a church 'of' everywhere where people's life takes place, fresh expressions pursue a church with people where people are found—like a floating dock meeting the boat on the water, instead of waiting for the ship to come.[49] Recently, the dialogue has developed a topic on the "mixed (or blended) ecology." It means a strategic coexistence of legacy churches and fresh expression ministries.[50] While a legacy church takes its position as a

[49] Kenneth H. Carter Jr. and Audrey Warren, *Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church for People Not in Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 55-56.
[50] Carter and Warren, *Fresh Expressions*, 72-73.

grounded center for the mission, fresh expressions can grow as grafted branches, consequently benefiting the whole church's mission. In doing so, both legacy church and fresh expressions can be made vital and be encountered or shared by many.

Likewise, the ministry hub as a whole can work as the trunk, sustaining one purpose and mission for one living body. All participating churches can be a fresh expression, working as branches or body parts. Each church is a byproduct of its own unique context. Therefore, their ministries have to stem from their surrounding community's particularity. At the same time, as a cooperative group, congregations ensure that the cooperative group serves a more extensive and broader vision for the sake of the larger community they serve. Respectively yet collectively, the cooperation builds the reign of God, united.

While the innovation project was an invaluable exploration, it also reveals some growth areas, especially when the UMC congregations try to build a thriving cooperative parish model. The first area of attention is the 'clergy evaluation.' For an effective appointment-making process, the UMC Annual Conferences have their own way of assessing each clergy and congregation. While it is essential to understand ministry vitality clearly, current evaluations are primarily based on quantitative measures. That is one of the most notable reasons why the culture of competition among clergy and churches has escalated. As Spence pointed out, there are blind spots of fruitfulness that current measurement cannot detect. There are stories numbers cannot tell—things like congregations' engagement level, increase of diversity, or empowerment of minorities cannot be measured by worship attendance or church budget.[51] As in the conflict OBUMC leadership experienced with the Youth Collaborate, sharing responsibility can also become an issue at any moment if members of the cooperation try to take advantage or claim the

[51] Spence, interview.

credit without shared contribution to the joint effort. Developing a new assessment tool and approach will be critical to strengthening the healthy culture of cooperative parish ministries in the UMC.

Second, as much as the denomination expects cooperative parishes to be innovative, the 'innovation of appointment discernment' must also be carefully contemplated. Due to the significance of the appointment system, in the UMC, cooperation cannot be simply a decision of local congregations, but the involvement of denominational leadership is a key element. In the exploratory project of Woodbridge Collective, the step for which leaders spent the most time was building trust and connection. While some pastors in Woodbridge were fortunate to have established friendships even before the collaboration, that will not be the case for everyone. One way to reduce this long probationary process can be to make appointments more purposeful and strategic. Bishops and their cabinet may consider appointing clergy as a team for cooperative parishes instead of sending separate individuals and letting them figure out themselves. Following up with continued support and training for the group is also important. Depending on the particularity of the context, assigning accountable leadership can be another consideration. In the history of Methodism, when the role of the DS was not yet developed into a separate position, there were presiding elders who oversaw a group of congregations while being in charge of their own church. It is worth navigating ways to reclaim this old tradition for cooperative parishes effectively.

That also brings up another need to reimagine the role of clergy and church property. More specifically, proactive conversations about 'bi-vocational ministers' and 'repurposing church building' can be helpful for the practical application of cooperative parishes. As noted earlier, many cooperative parishes are urged by the context that churches cannot afford a full-

time minister. Such a sense of urgency and desperation generally do not lead the innovation to an expected outcome. In some cases, it could be helpful to strategically consider having bi-vocational clergy as part of the cooperation parish's leadership. While being bi-vocational may create added constraints on the availability of clergy leaders, it can free up ministry funds that could have been used for salaries otherwise.[52] It can also provide a significant opportunity for churches to connect with the outside community at relatively inexpensive cost or investment, since the pastor, the strongest point of connection for many churches, can freely interact with others outside the congregation throughout the entire weekdays.

In the same manner, cooperative parish can also help individual churches reconceptualize the use of their property. Working together, one of some practical observations Woodbridge Collective made was this: Not every building is critical for the cooperative mission. Still, many congregations are spending a significant amount of their time, attention, and resources for this work of little priority. Place is an asset that is owned by somebody, but if there is goodwill, it can often be a blessing that belongs to everyone at the same time.[53] By repurposing church properties into places like health care facilities, community centers, or food pantries, church grounds can be a vessel of mutual blessing for the church and community.[54] Of course, conversations of this kind are difficult ones. And yet, they are a crucial part of an effective cooperative parish, as its purpose includes prioritizing vision over institution. Woodbridge Collective's attempt at the collective project of affordable housing can be one good example of how to approach such a challenging topic. A community garden which one member church of the Woodbridge Collective

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[52] Ralph B. Wright Jr., "Changes in Ministry and Bivocational Ministry since the 1960s," *Bivocational and Beyond: Educating for Thriving Multivocational Ministry*, ed. Darryl W. Stephen (May 4, 2022): 57-59, accessed November 11, 2024, https://doi.org/10.31046/atlaopenpress.82.
[53] Walljasper, *All That We Share*, 135.
[54] Elsdon, "What Happens," 11-12.

offers and other churches jointly support, or the mission campus which The Nett operates across the cooperation, can be another creative way that cooperative parishes can address the issues of excessive buildings and grounds.

Conclusion

Cooperative parish has been an old practice in the tradition of the UMC connection. However, knowing it or doing it for a long time does not necessarily guarantee its effectiveness. The reality is often the opposite, as intimate systems easily become vulnerable to derailing from their original mindset. There is a certain risk one can call a danger of familiarity. Still, cooperative parish can provide unique opportunities as an empowering tool for congregations when designed with purpose and creativity. It can also help the denomination reclaim its root for missional vitality. Any of the four potential models reviewed in the first half of this research paper can contribute to the goal. At the same time, no one model can answer all kinds of circumstances. There is always room for creativity, as the suggested models are not the only available form of cooperation in the UMC. Churches and their leaders must keep endeavoring nimble efforts, identifying the best forms and patterns of cooperative parish in response to the adaptive challenge of their given context.

In that sense, cooperative parish is an evolving ecclesiology. Over the long history of Methodism, the ways cooperative parishes are understood, applied, and assessed have shifted consistently. It will always remain a work in progress. As in the case of Woodbridge Collective, with an adequate investment of time and attention toward trust, creative ideas, honest conversations, and shared accountability, churches can identify a distinctive way for this unique innovation. Considering the particularity of the UMC's structure, there are areas for the denomination, too, to pursue creativity as much as it requests local congregations or pastors to

embrace new ideas. Especially, creating an effective assessment tool for the fruitfulness of clergy and congregations requires immediate attention from the denomination's leadership. Inventing a way to include qualitative factors, such as narratives, impacts, and synergy between congregations in connection, especially regarding cooperative parish, will allow the UMC more innovations for its future ecclesiology.

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