

Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

Terry Lee Tilton

4/29/2025

Is There Hope for My Small Church?

By

Terry L. Tilton,
Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

L. Edward Phillips, PhD
Project Consultant

Dr. Roger Nam, PhD
Director of the DMin Program

Abstract

Is There Hope for My Small Church?

By Terry L. Tilton

The decline of small churches in America presents a significant challenge to faith communities. With 177,000 small churches accounting for only 16% of total church membership, many face dwindling attendance, financial strain, and the fear of losing their identity as community witnesses. This dissertation explores whether there is hope for the small church, particularly through the case study of the Chisholm United Methodist Church in Chisholm, Minnesota.

Small churches must navigate an existential crisis, with church closures projected to increase over the next two to three decades. Where do they find a meaningful theology of hope? Where are they in the church's life cycle? Can they be motivated to seek renewal through dialogue, study, and action?

This dissertation argues that true hope is grounded in perseverance and the expectation that God is not done with us yet. When churches redefine their mission with forward-looking hope, aligning with God's ongoing action, they can find a meaningful course forward.

Is There Hope For My Small Church?

By

Terry L. Tilton

Bemidji State University, B. S., 1972
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, M. Div., 1977

Project Consultant: Dr. L. Edward Phillips, PhD

A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the
Candler School of Theology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Ministry
2025

“IS THERE HOPE FOR MY SMALL CHURCH?”

“Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.” -- Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

One hundred and seventy-seven thousand or fifty-nine percent.¹ This is the estimated number of small churches in the United States, and I am the pastor of one of them. Maybe you are a pastor or member, too. Small churches worship fewer than one hundred people on a Sunday morning.

Today, a harsh reality is that small churches across America are growing in numbers but not in members. Of the estimated fifty-six million church members in America, only nine million, or slightly more than sixteen percent, are members of small churches.

Surveys show that average worship attendance for small churches has plummeted to 65 members from 137 in just twenty years, from 2000 to 2020.² Ryan Burge, a political science professor at Eastern Illinois University and author of *The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, says a significant driver in this membership trend is the number of young people with no religious affiliation – a group known as the “nones” He writes, “Boomers are about 20% 'nones' and Gen Z is about 45% 'nones,' so you're just seeing this kind of slow wave sweep across America.”³⁴ He believes about a third of the country's 350,000

¹ Christopher Watson, “Worship in the Average Church in America”, *Worship Leader*, June 26, 2023, accessed January 10, 2025, <https://worshipleader.com/leadership/worship-in-the-average-church-in-america/>.

² Scott Neuman, “The faithful see both crisis and opportunity as churches close across the country”, *Faith Communities Today*, May 17, 2023, survey by Hartford Institute for Religion Research, accessed November 10, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/17/1175452002/church-closings-religious-affiliation>.

³ For Information: **Gen Z:** Born between 1999 and 2015; **Millennial:** Born between 1984 and 1998; **Gen X:** Born between 1965 and 1983; **Boomer:** Born between 1946 and 1964; **Elder:** Born before 1946.

⁴ Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2021.

Christian congregations are "on the brink of extinction."⁵ If his prediction is accurate, one can only anticipate that most of these closures will be among small churches. "Every year, the pews are getting emptier and the collection plates getting lighter," he says. "We're going to see thousands of churches closing in America over the next 20 or 30 years in every part of the country, in every region and every state, urban, suburban, rural."⁶⁷

I grew up in a small church and continue to serve it, even in retirement, because I believe it serves an essential purpose in God's plan. In many communities, the small church is the center of faith-sharing and fellowship, worship, and community outreach, bringing stability that helps to hold the community together while growing in God's love and care for one another.

My paper is not a definitive study of the small church. It does not propose having all the answers to the small church dilemma. But it seeks to ask the question, "Is There Hope for My Small Church?" with the expectation that it may provide some resources and guidance that may assist your church in answering this question, as it has for mine. Studying and sharing the experience and application of a particular United Methodist model, this pastor has moved from lingering foreboding and fear for my small church to the reality that all churches are living entities infused by God's Spirit. Each one attempts to carry out their mission in their community and the world with faithfulness and love. As a living organism, all are ultimately subject to the universal cycle of birth, life, and death. But for Christians, our faith teaches us this cycle is birth, life, death, and, most profoundly, resurrection. Sometimes, that cycle can

⁵ Neuman, "The faithful see both crisis and opportunity," *Faith Communities Today*.

⁶ Neuman, "The faithful see both crisis and opportunity," *Faith Communities Today*.

⁷ *Lifeway Research* estimates in 2019, the year before the pandemic, more Protestant churches closed than opened in the U.S.A. (3000 opened and 4,500 closed), accessed January 10, 2025, <https://research.lifeway.com/>.

be interdicted by renewal and recommitment, and sometimes, it can only lead to leaving a legacy for new life to begin again in ways yet to be born.

This is the story of the Chisholm United Methodist Church in Chisholm, Minnesota. Your story will be different, but the search for hope is uniquely a part of our universal Christian longing.

A THEOLOGY OF HOPE

"There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something better tomorrow."

-- Orison Sweet Marden, *He Can Who Thinks He Can*

When we think of hope, we often wish for a return to what has been.

In the process of losing something, it is human nature to hope that we can return to a time when we were most happy or copesettic. People do it. Churches do it, too. As the Apostle Paul reminds us, hope is most often sought when produced through painful trial and tribulation. "Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4 NIV). Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) says hope is "a passion for what is possible." Passion comes from the Latin word *pati*, which means "suffer or endure." A passion for the possible implies you must consider what you are willing to endure today for a better tomorrow. It is not a question that can be answered with *once I overcome this adversity, I'll know what to do*. Instead, the answer is found in the present moment — in your challenges and triumphs and the application of your core values.⁸

In another place, Kierkegaard says hope is "the expectation of the possibility of good." For Christians, our hope is grounded in the promises of our faith. We believe in a caring, personal God

⁸ Joe Primo, "A Passionate Hope That Endures," *Grateful Living* accessed January 12, 2025, <https://grateful.org/resource/passionate-hope-endures/>.

of resurrection power and a God who can bring life from death. "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Psalm 42:11 NIV)

My small church is not dead but on life support. Too quickly, it is tempted to look back at what it was and fearful of where it is now. Out of a milieu of mixed emotions, this paper tries to answer the question, "Is There Hope for My Small Church?" But it must be hope grounded in positive relational steps forward. As Luther E. Smith, Jr. says, "hope is inherently relational" and "requires action and accountability."

The question is, how do we recover that sense of relational and accountable hope? How will we recover the truth of American educator Myles Horton's dictum, "Nothing will change until we change—until we throw off our dependencies and act for ourselves."⁹

As you see, the definition of hope applied to the small church's issues must be directed to the future and not some anticipated recovery of the past. We must be open to what God can do to show us how to be the church in our community again, and we must always prayerfully acknowledge our cooperation with God to find the way forward. Ultimately, hope must be grounded in discernment and expectation that God will lead us through the storm and into the bright light of a dawning new reality. This is only satisfying and real hope for the small church.

Let us now turn to the subject of this paper—the Chisholm United Methodist Church in Chisholm, Minnesota. Although its context and setting are unique, as are those of every church, its history, growth, and decline parallel much of American Protestantism in the Twentieth Century.

⁹ Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*, (Anchor Books, New York, 1991).

HOPING AGAINST HOPE

“The greatest architect and the one most needed is hope.”

-- Henry Ward Beecher, *Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit*

Hoping against hope may best typify the attitude of the Chisholm United Methodist Church.

The Chisholm United Methodist Church is at the center of the Mesaba Iron Range in northeastern Minnesota. It is situated in the Chisholm community of approximately 4687 (2023)¹⁰ residents whose primary industry is iron ore open-pit mining. In its last glory days, before and during the 1970s, over 18,400 miners worked in the taconite iron ore industry, Minnesota's second highest-paying job. Due to mechanization and industry fluctuation, fewer than 4,000 are employed today. The communities of the Iron Range have become more gentrified, and two generations of its youth have not found opportunities to work in the communities in which they grew up.

Within a two-mile radius of the Chisholm United Methodist Church, 26 percent of the population lives in or near poverty, compared with 16 percent nationally. The median individual income is \$27,514.¹¹ Public schools have seen a steady decrease in enrollment of approximately one to one and a half percent per year during the past forty years. The Chisholm Senior High School will have a graduating class of 45 students in May 2025, compared to over 200 in the 1970s. The need for social services and elderly care has grown exponentially, while employment in these industries is in critical shortage.

¹⁰ Accessed November 18, 2024, https://www.google.com/search?q=population+of+chisholm+mn&eq=population+&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqDQgAEEUYOBg7GEYY-wEyDQgAEEUYOBg7GEYY-wEyDwgBEAAYQxjJAXiABBiKBTIGCAIQRRg5MggIAxBFGCcYOzINCAQQABiSaxiABBiKBTINCAUQABiSaxiABBiKBTIMCAYQA BhDGIAEGIoFMgwIBxAAGEMYgAQYigUyDAgIEAAYQxiABBiKBTIPCAkQABhDGLLEDGIAEGIoF0gEIMzM3OWowajeoAgCwAgA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8.

¹¹ “Ranking by Median Individual Income, All Cities in St. Louis County,” *Data Commons*, accessed November 18, 2024, https://datacommons.org/ranking/Median_Income_Person/City/geoId/27137?h=geoId%2F2711386

The Chisholm community represents a microcosm of the issues facing many small towns and their institutions. For most small towns across America, agriculture is the primary source of income. For the Iron Range of northeastern Minnesota, iron ore mining represents a 1.2-billion-dollar economy with its satellite industries. For those employed in this industry, it is a good source of income. For many others in service-related industries, it has marginal opportunities for advancement and often limited employee benefits. Hospitals, nursing homes, and public safety services appear to be the communities' only growing institutions.

Today, the Chisholm United Methodist Church is a shadow of its former glory days. It was the oldest and largest Protestant church in the community, with 461 members and a Sunday School that averaged 65 children and youth.¹² This was also in the 1970s, and like the Iron Range, it has slowly dwindled in size and capacity to do ministry. Today, there are 49 members and an average worship attendance of 16 in person and 16 online.¹³ The Sunday School closed in 2006 due to a lack of children and youth, and today, the only activity apart from Sunday morning worship is a pastor-led adult Bible study with five members. One by one, over the past fifty years, ministries of outreach and in-reach have collapsed due to a lack of workers and the gentrification of the church. Today, the average age of all members is 77, with the youngest being 28 and the oldest being 96, and no members in the 40- and 50-year age brackets are affiliated with the church.¹⁴

Is There Hope for the Small Church? For my small church? This question is crucial to the survival of Christian churches in thousands of communities across the United States.

¹² Minnesota Annual Conference, United Methodist Church, *Conference Journal*, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.minnesotaumc.org/conference-journal>.

¹³ "Chisholm United Methodist Church Annual Report", Minnesota Annual Conference UMC, December 31, 2023.

¹⁴ "Chisholm United Methodist Church Membership Secretary Report", December 31, 2023.

There is an old saying that all politics are local, meaning political solutions must meet the needs of those most affected. This is also true when trying to answer the question about survival for the small church. The dynamics, history, and issues affecting every small church are different. The question of hope for my small church can only be answered from my context, although some of the principles and applications I use may be helpful for learning in other situations. As we shall see, I will also need to explain and better understand the dynamics of my involvement as pastor, leader, and mentor in this discernment process. However, to recover hope for the small church, we must first look at the strengths and weaknesses of the small church and the methods of change. What are the resources that we should look at that might be employed?

RESOURCES FOR HOPE

“Hope is fragile and needs to be tended and renewed.”

– Patrick Shade, *Habits of Hope*

The issue of hope for the small church is not found in silver bullets in large ideas with profound and grandiose action. Instead, it begins in a discernment process, recognizing we cannot continue to do what we are doing and expect different results. It reminds us to periodically pause and ask ourselves, “Are we faithfully fulfilling Christ’s call and commission for our church?”¹⁵ Many books, journal articles, and electronic publications dissect and share insights and recommendations on what the small church can do to recover relevancy and find renewed hope. I want to share a few of the resources that I have found most helpful in understanding the dynamics of the small church and giving practical insights and prescriptions for the body of Christ to discover a renewed sense of purpose and meaning.

¹⁵ Beth M. Crissman and Nancy B. Rankin, “*Choosing the Faithful Path: A Bible Study for Discerning a Faithful Future*,” (Plowpoint Press, 2015), 11.

“Recovering HOPE for Your Church: Moving Beyond Maintenance and Missional to Incarnation Engagement” by Edward Hammett is a practical guide for helping the church recognize and address significant issues for effective ministry in our modern society. The primary issue confronting the church, Hammett states, is "The memories and gifts that acknowledge our earthly loves often keep us from pursuing God, who can move us into the future. God always creates new things, while many churches desire to hold onto the old things (2 Cor. 5:17).¹⁶ God keeps bringing hope for the future while we grasp tightly to experience the past."¹⁷

This book is specifically written to encourage churches to address significant issues in their ministry that encumber effective witness and outreach to new generations. Hammett calls the church to an incarnational style of ministry which "is rooted in embracing the new realities, committing to the tough road of recovery, and developing new skills, structures, and ministry designs through a process of spiritual discernment, congregational coaching of faith communities wherever they are found or emerge, and a deeper reliance on the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit."¹⁸

Maybe it's time we preserve and magnify the church's functions, rather than forms, in a more incarnational, organic language, if we want to speak effectively to the twenty-first century. I would propose that functions like relational, redemption, restoration, and forgiveness replace the traditional functions many churches embrace – evangelism, discipleship, worship."¹⁹

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (NIV)

¹⁷ Edward H. Hammett, *“Recovering HOPE for Your Church: Moving beyond Maintenance and Missional to Incarnational Engagement”*, (TCP Books, 2014), xvi.

¹⁸ Hammett, *“Recovering Hope,”* xxi.

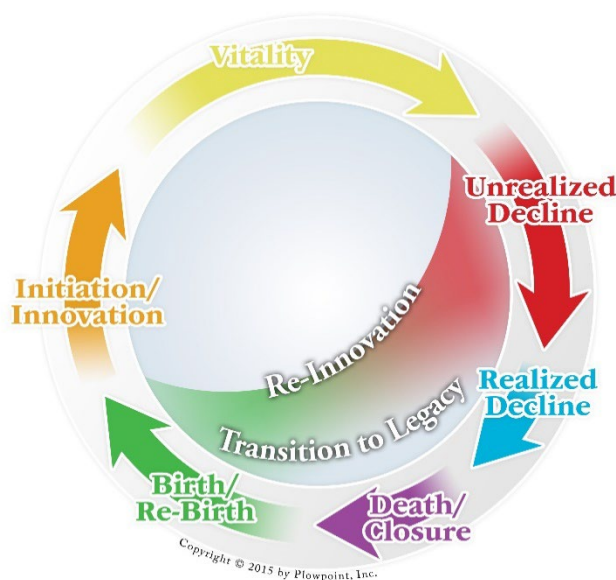
¹⁹ Hammett, *“Recovering Hope,”* 127.

It should not be surprising that Hammett, who has worked as a congregational church consultant and change agent, consistently reminds the reader that outside help is often needed to recognize and bring the church into a new ministry model.

So seldom do we, as church leaders, admit we do not have all the answers. We are encouraged to attend workshops on nearly every facet of ministry engagement and to implement these exciting new ideas. However, being on the inside of the church recommending change, even as a pastor or priest, has limitations we seldom recognize or address. Sometimes, maybe more often than we want to admit, it takes an outside, neutral, professional change agent to say and do what we cannot to the members of our church.

In the spring of 2024, retired Bishop Larry Goodpaster directed me to consider a resource from his North Carolina jurisdiction through the ministry of *Plowpoint, Inc.* It is *Choosing the Faithful Path: A Bible Study for Discerning a Faithful Future*. It was developed specifically to assist United Methodist congregations in meeting the requirements of *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, IP 213.

This is one of the few publications I have found that best graphically illustrates the life cycle of organizations, especially the church. I believe it is an insight that needs to begin all discussions about church revitalization. When we recognize that much of the decline in our congregations is



Used by Permission – “Choosing the Faithful Path”
Plowpoint.com

attributed to our inability or unwillingness to change, we see in this illustration how the church stabilizes and settles, often imperceptibly

at first, into decline toward death/closure that follows. Unless there is recognition and interdiction, the cycle has inevitable consequences.

In this life cycle, or could we call it the ministry cycle, the issue for the church is when it will recognize this decline and act? Will it be through a reassessment of its ministry effectiveness and outreach? Will it be when the community it serves has changed its economic, racial, or social complexion and presents new ministry opportunities? Will it be when the congregation sees potential for expanded ministry and outreach of existing programs and is willing to risk human and financial resources to enlarge and grow them? Or will it be too late when the human resources regarding participation and financial support are so diminished that they have truncated any possibility of risking any new ministry venture to become a more vital church? This study guide for discerning a faithful path can help any church that is serious about its future to understand its ministry context, leadership capacity, resources, and spirit-led gifts to move into the future confident that it can better fulfill its potential and, with work, share more effectively God's love.

Many small church resources have various markers for ministry effectiveness. Lewis A. Parks, in a provocative article from *Leading Ideas*, Lewis Center for Church Leadership titled *A Better Script for Small Churches*²⁰ believes his "dynamic equilibrium" concept best describes a healthy small church. He argues that membership size is not the determinant of a healthy church. Instead, it is the strength or balance of these five factors:

²⁰ Lewis A. Parks, "*A Better Script for Small Churches*, *Leading Ideas*, Lewis Center for Church Leadership," May 26, 2010, accessed August 14, 2024, <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/a-better-script-for-small-churches/>.

- Is the church multi-generational because the faith is not just for the present generation (Gen 15:5-6; 2 Tim 1:5)?²¹
- Does it apply the church's metrics of vitality and faithfulness, such as its capacity to hold diverse persons in a unity of purpose, making the church one in Christ and one in Spirit?
- Does the church cherish its ministry story but also want to write a new chapter?
- Does the church creatively adapt to environmental changes rather than closing itself off from change?
- Does the church grow in members and stewardship at a pace that offsets losses and increased demands?

He argues that the drama of a small church is not the drama of membership or ministry growth with goals hit or missed, but the drama of endurance—of keeping the faith against incredible odds over extended periods. From my experience, this is precisely how the small church faces the headwinds of change and time. At a minimum, this endurance must balance membership and financial gains and losses to keep the church afloat with some measure of stability.

Is the church dying? Is my church dying? According to Rev. Anna B. Olson, in a book titled *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom Beyond Survival*, every church is dying or will die.

The truth is that for every church, no matter the size, death comes one person, one beloved tradition, and one needed repair to the roof at a time. It is often more sad than dramatic. Olson points to another awkward truth in most of our ministry contexts. It is the certainty that we have neighbors looking to be "churched" and willing to commit to regular Sunday attendance if we can only engage them, which she says is only a "mirage."²² For many pastors and lay people, giving

²¹ Ref., "He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" (Genesis 15:5-6 NIV)

"I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also." (2 Timothy 1:5 NIV)

²² Anna B. Olson, *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom Beyond Survival*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016) 2.

up is easy. But the truth is that it is both easy and hard. As Olson reminds us, the hard part is trusting the Biblical truth that the path to resurrection is through death.

I found this to be a refreshing insight, a reawakening of the center of our faith that the church needs to hear. As Olson writes, “God is not finished...there is more life, more hope...but we are freed from the shape it will take.”²³ She says this gives us the future with new freedom and faith rather than fear and the weight of failure. It frees us to let the Spirit work in and through us to whatever ends God has for us (John 3:8).²⁴

Is my task as pastor to accept the reality that I am to minister to a dying church through a faithful death and into whatever lies beyond? Can we live out our lives and the life of this church in the hope that God is not done with us yet? As Olson writes, “This is a book of practices for faithful dying, for discovering resurrection where it is already popping up, for remembering that God is always doing a new thing, for finding beauty in the present, in one another and the neighbors God has given us, for loving and being loved, forgiving and being forgiven, for giving up on being church-builders and entrepreneurs and being people of the Way once again.”²⁵

When we focus on the center of our faith, Olson reminds us, “Resurrection is no easy way to new life. It tosses out our comfortable hopes for the familiar and rewrites the future in spite of us. Resurrection is God's alone. Our part is the dying part. The rising is all God's, and the shape of the Risen One belongs to God as well.”²⁶ These are hard truths for pastors to preach and laity to believe.

²³ Olson, “*Claiming Resurrection*,” 3.

²⁴ “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8 NIV)

²⁵ Olson, “*Claiming Resurrection*,” 8.

²⁶ Olson, “*Claiming Resurrection*,” 11.

I highly recommend this book to church pastors and lay leaders of any size. It offers some practical and valuable practices that every church can employ to reawaken the importance of remembering that God is not finished with us yet. but as Olson reminds us, "If we die in the midst of the work of love, we have nothing to fear but resurrection."²⁷

This summary and evaluation of resources closes with two books that were easy to read but hard to swallow because their advice seems challenging to assimilate into pastoral ministry. Waiting for God to act and to discern the Spirit's direction is difficult. Waiting is hard, and it is antithetical to our secular lifestyle. Many pastors are beleaguered and anxious about the continuing congregational decline. We are the leaders who are supposed to know how to reverse the trends, but nothing seems to work. Hope is diminishing, and we are weary. *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation Beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation* by Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand speaks directly to our current situation. Although it is contrary to our natural inclinations, it offers much-needed hope as an antithesis to what we are doing that is not working.

The authors want us to remember that decline is not our problem; instead, our big issue is that we have been infected by the secular age, leaving us with a diminished concept of God. It is not that fewer people have faith; it is that our faith, as expressed in our worship and practice, connects with fewer people. They argue that waiting is not throwing up our hands in despair, frustration, or resignation; instead, waiting is a positive act of surrender to God. While we wait, we should build relationships, passionately attend to each other in this moment, and seek God together.

²⁷ Olson, "Claiming Resurrection," 9.

I recommend this book of comfort and hope to exasperated pastors because we focus so much effort on our actions to resolve the crisis of decline. Root and Bertrand give us a single word of instruction: Wait! Wait for the "God who is God" to show up. We have tried everything else. Let's wait for a while. With an act of faith, God may surprise us.

Dr. Desmond Barrett, in a small book titled *Revitalizing the Declining Small Church: From Death's Door to Community Growth*, asks us to also not underestimate the power of prayer in the renewal and revitalization of a church. Barrett profiles eight pastors charged with the daunting task of leading churches on the verge of death to new life. While the steps toward revitalization are unique to each case study, prayer is consistently used in each church. Revitalization can only take place, he says, through a revival of prayer. Prayer revives the people of God, renews their passion for ministry, refocuses on mission, and revitalizes the church.²⁸

This book is a not-so-subtle reminder that God is still at work and that Christ (Colossians 1:18)²⁹ can bring churches back from the precipice of death to new life. It is a needed word of encouragement with practical benefits to churches of all sizes who are stressed and fearful of their current ministry trajectory. In many ways, each of the resources I have listed in this section is given to revive hope and confidence that the God we worship is active and influential if we will only cooperate, believe, and act on the promptings of the Holy Spirit and seize the opportunities that come knocking at our doors. Waiting with prayer and faith seems too little, too late, but all these resources encourage us to believe in the God of possibilities.

²⁸ Desmond Barrett, *Revitalizing the Declining Small Church: From Death's Door to Community Growth*, (Wipf & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2021), vii.

²⁹ Ref., "And he (Christ) is the head of the body, the church; he is beginning and the firstborn from among the dead so that he might have supremacy in everything." (Colossians 1:18 NIV)

LOOKING FOR HOPE

“What we call our despair is often only the painful eagerness of unfed hope.”

– George Elliot, *Middlemarch*

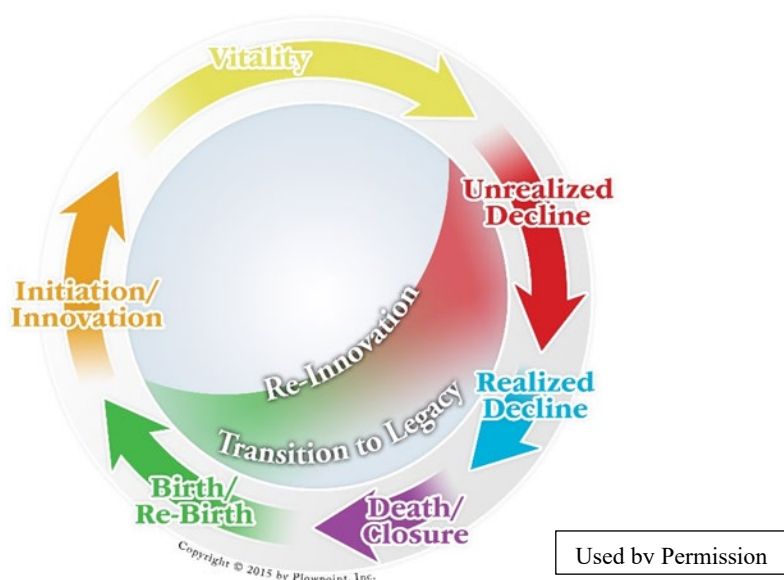
In his book, *Hope Is Here: Spiritual Practices for Pursuing Justice and Beloved Community*, Luther E. Smith Jr. defines hope as actionable faith. He says it grounds our lives with a greater purpose that requires action and responsibility to create a beloved community. “The work of hope and love makes demands upon us that transform habits, relationships, and commitment. With all life's complex situations and myriad considerations in discernment, hope, and love guide us to face a simple yet life-changing decision: *sacrifice*.”³⁰

This is precisely the most pressing issue. Can the small church make this life-changing decision of sacrifice? Hope is more than waiting for change; it is intentional relationship-building work. It is the crux of the matter with the small church. How does one move or motivate the church to look beyond what it has been to what it could be? How does one help them to look outward and not inward, seeing the beloved community as a goal for greater social justice and perhaps a renewed future? How does one help them create the future rather than long for the past?

This is the dilemma I faced as pastor of the Chisholm United Methodist Church in my desire to find hope for the small church. As cited, *Plowpoint, Inc.* has a very telling portrait of the church's life cycle. It follows the traditional Christian pattern of birth, life, death, and resurrection. However, its definitions appropriately use sociological/interpersonal terms, including birth/rebirth, initiation/innovation, vitality, unrealized decline, realized decline, and death/closure. Two inner loops are added to this. One from unrealized decline to re-innovation, and the other from realized

³⁰ Luther E. Smith, Jr., “*Hope Is Here: Spiritual Practices for Pursuing Justice and Beloved Community*”, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 133-134.

decline to a transition to legacy.³¹ Adapting this model to understand the stage of life for our



Chisholm United Methodist Church was necessary and essential in finding common ground to discern how we had become the church we were in 2024, one hundred and seventeen years after our founding. And more importantly, where our continued trajectory would lead us without some significant change, interdiction, or God-event.

In the Fall of 2023, I requested that the church Administrative/Council consider doing a congregational survey through a questionnaire sent to all our members. It also asked them to reflect on the future of the church. Although only 25 percent of the members responded, many noted family ties with the church for generations. They expressed love for their church and its traditions. All were nostalgic for the church they or their family grew up in. Many did not know what the church could do at this point in its life cycle, but some suggested that programs that worked in the past might be reinstituted as they were remembered with great pride.

³¹ "Choosing the Faithful Path", accessed November 20, 2024, [https://plowpoint.org/life cycle of a church](https://plowpoint.org/life-cycle-of-a-church).

The questionnaire and its results were reported to the congregation, but they did not generate any actionable change in our ministries.

As Smith notes in his book, hope is actionable faith. It is not just wishful thinking but a commitment to community building to address systemic issues. Among other things, he recommends communal reflection and spiritual engagement through prayer.³² To this end, in the Spring of 2024, I preached six sermons focusing on our small church issues like changing demographics, community ethnography, and cultural pressures that have affected our local church and the broader Christian community. Each sermon concluded by reflecting on how the church might re-engage with the community to renew ministry and outreach. We also began encouraging daily devotions and communal Sunday prayer to actively seek God's help and direction

In May, upon our District Superintendent's recommendation and my encouragement, the Administrative Council invited the Reverend Doctor Susan Nienaber, Director of Congregational Vitality of the Minnesota Annual Conference, to begin a United Methodist church renewal program called "*Conversations at the Crossroads.*" This program adopted the design of a more comprehensive church study program, *Choosing the Faithful Path: A Bible Study for Discerning a Faithful Future*. The core of this program was to encourage the church to pray for renewed vitality, to seek spiritual discernment, and to complete in-person or telephone interviews with a staff consultant. Approximately forty percent of the congregation participated in this consultation, and a report was presented back to the church on Sunday, June 23, 2024.

At the Administrative/Council meeting the following September, the Board spent more than an hour discussing Rev. Dr. Nienaber's recommendations in greater detail. When

³² Smith, "*Hope Is Here*", 72.

recommending new ministries, invariably, the discussion turned to skepticism that we could find the energy in human and financial resources to make a new program initiative work. But more telling was simply the acknowledgment that the church did not know what program or ministry could be initiated, as “other churches are doing those things.” Only two recommendations came out of the meeting: 1) invite a neighboring United Methodist pastor who has seen some success in small church revitalization to share with the Administrative Council, and 2) write a letter to Reverend Bishop Amy J. Odgren of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod Evangelical Lutheran Church advising her that our church would entertain talks on cooperative ministries with Faith United Lutheran Church across the street from the Chisholm United Methodist Church.

Of the first initiative, Rev. John Scheuer of neighboring Wesley United Methodist Church in Hibbing, Minnesota, was invited to attend the November 2024 Administrative/Council meeting. He shared his experiences working with a couple of small churches, one of which has not found revitalized activity. The other, however, through a series of simple community outreach ventures, has seen a doubling in worship attendance (from twelve to thirty or forty). He acknowledged that there is no magic bullet to church revitalization, and it must be contextual. He encouraged the church to try one or two new outreach ministries and see if they might stimulate new growth and vitality for the congregation. Unfortunately, his suggestions met with the same concerns as Rev. Dr. Nienaber's. We do not know what to do to reach out, and we do not have the energy or commitment to do anything differently. This was more readily accepted as the finance committee's report at that meeting stated that through unexpected special gifts, we had replenished some of our

financial reserves and that a crisis in meeting our budget, including Christian Service apportionments, had been averted for this year.³³

I have often returned to the synecdoche (a figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole or vice versa) of the two large stained-glass windows in our beautiful church sanctuary. Installed during the church's early years, they represented evangelical fervor through prayer and repentance, relying on God's grace, which typified the preaching of the Wesleyan revival known as Methodism. This is represented in the east window of Christ kneeling in prayer in the shadowed garden of Gethsemane. The west window of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a lamb is bright and filled with color, representing the warmth and comfort of living in the faithful covenant of Christ and His Church. But in more recent times, after fifty years of membership decline and program cutbacks, they now represent the agony of Gethsemane with the sadness and trial that lies ahead for the church to discern its future and possible closure. For many, the Good Shepherd window represents a repressed longing for the happy years when two-morning worship services were overflowing, and there was not enough space to contain the children and family ministries.

As pastor of this church, they also represent to me the dichotomy of my fears and longings. I am deeply saddened to see what is happening to the Chisholm United Methodist Church. Historically, it has significantly contributed to the community's vitality and has had a long and remembered life of ministries contributing to its vitality. But now, the point of unrealized decline has long passed in the church's life cycle, and we are unwinding to the end of a slow but evident realized decline. This is the last church I will ever serve as its minister. I cannot help but think that,

³³ This occurred after the end of the previous year, when the church could not meet its \$6,035 Christian service apportionments to the Minnesota Annual Conference.

somehow, I have failed in my ministry and attempts to change the church's trajectory. It is not unlike my life (and ministry), which is also ending. After 52 years, I feel I no longer have the strength and energy to inspire or engage the church in new directions toward regrowth and vitality. Like Densu in *The Healers*,³⁴ I have refused to resort to manipulation, even if I could, to achieve an end—even a good one, a scripturally warranted one—if it is not infused with the power of hope by the very people who must make it happen. I have suggested, preached, taught, and prayed for the church to consider ways to encourage those outside its doors to become a renewed focus for our ministry and caring. Regrettably, my overtures have fallen on tired and deaf ears. I can do no more.

The sad truth is that hope, such as a revival or renewal, is hard to imagine for the Chisholm United Methodist Church. As educator and sociologist Myles Horton has noted about this kind of hope, “Nothing will change until we change—until we give up our dependence and act for ourselves.”³⁵ His comments were directed at doing ministries of social justice in the community. However, they apply to the church with one caveat: God may have a bigger plan. My analysis is that the church is discouraged based on an ageing and declining membership, a diminished lack of engagement with the community and its needs, and a false understanding of hope, which has too radically focused on trying to be the church that we have been. This is coupled with the discouragement that we no longer have confidence in having the resources (human or financial) to make any meaningful difference in our trajectory.

HOPE DISCOVERED

“Hope is a day the end of which we may never see.”

— Edward Counsel, *Maxims*

³⁴Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Healers*, (East African Publishing House, Nairobi, Africa, 2016), 37.

³⁵Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (Anchor Books, January 1, 1990).

Early in the process of discernment for what we should do to reboot or renew the Chisholm United Methodist Church, we had the strong recommendation of our Minnesota Annual Conference United Methodist Office of Church Vitality to use a process that included an outside consultant. At first, I, as pastor, resisted this suggestion, believing that I could motivate the church to do a guided United Methodist Bible study like Crissman and Rankin's *Choosing the Faithful Path: A Bible Study for Discerning a Faithful Future*. Two difficulties quickly arose in using this resource. The first was the time commitment needed by the members of the Administrative/Council who would be involved. The process could take 10-12 weeks or longer. But most concerning was the awareness that I might not be able to motivate the appointed leaders to commit to doing the interviews, community ethnographic studies, or personal consultations with church members and members in the surrounding community to complete the eight units of work which would lead to a solid factual set of goals or ministry recommendations. I realized we would not use this detailed process as effectively as we should, nor could I impress them with the importance of all the elements being utilized in order.

As it turned out, the use of a ministry consultant, in retrospect, was necessary, and thankfully, the Reverend Susan Nienaber, Director of Congregational Vitality, agreed to be that consultant and lead this process with a program titled *Conversations at the Crossroads*. Through a questionnaire I circulated to all the members, I knew the church members were saddened and discouraged over the church's future. This had little to do with my previous years of ministry as a part-time supply pastor but more with the long, slow, and continued aging and loss of members and the cessation of nearly all areas of program outreach. The COVID-19 epidemic also exacerbated the situation with the attrition of families who, for whatever reason, did not return to in-person Sunday morning worship services and participation in the church's life.

From his church mentoring background, Edward Hammett strongly encourages the church to incorporate an incarnational style of ministry. We do this when we embody Jesus in our lives, actions, and attitudes. This means being visibly present in the community, with spiritual discernment through prayer, and developing new skills to serve those on the margins of our society. To do this, he insists, they need a coach to assist them in accepting the new realities of ministry. “Through congregational coaching, many people will come to the same awareness that how something is done is not sacred, and embracing change may renew the church.” That is true, but it will be highly dependent on the receptivity of the church in its life cycle. Citing the process of change that reinvigorated an old downtown church, he states, “Hope can be restored to a church - even an old downtown church with an aging congregation - but it takes work, faith, prayer, leadership, and intentionality.”³⁶ Sadly, many of these elements are missing in the current dynamic of the Chisholm United Methodist Church. Yet, we do not give up hope.

Luther Smith Jr. states, “To hope is to believe that God's promises are trustworthy, even when the path ahead is obscure and filled with trials.”³⁷ This is a profound religious truth, but when a congregation has lived with unrealized hope, however misapplied for so long that it cannot or will not act, all you have left are the promises of God. Maybe those promises will come with the completion of a merger or cooperative ministry agreement with our neighboring Faith Lutheran Church. Could that move God's Kingdom into an unknown future filled with new possibilities? Or will an unexpected spiritual awakening happen within the congregation or the community? Or will the church's legacy become its land and building used for other purposes or ministries? I do not

³⁶Hammett, *Recovering Hope*, 130.

³⁷Smith, *Hope Is Here*, 72.

know, and today, I, like the Chisholm United Methodist Church, am left only to draw upon Scripture to walk by faith, not sight.³⁸

At this time in the life cycle of the Chisholm United Methodist Church, forces or opportunities from outside the church must most influence its future. In truth, just as people suffer from burnout, the Chisholm United Methodist Church, as a relational and interpersonal community, also suffers from burnout. This was an important insight for me when I realized that as ministers become overwhelmed, overworked, and run on empty, so can churches. Because of age and decline in numbers, there is not enough energy to tackle new tasks, let alone continue old ones. This nearly imperceptible process has been diminishing the return on investment of its members now for over forty years.

Still, as pastor and church leader, I cling to the hope Anna Olson affirms in her book *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church*, when she writes, “God is not finished...there is more life, more hope...but we are freed from the shape it will take.”³⁹ Of course, this is the work of the Holy Spirit, the easily forgotten Third Person of the Trinity. As Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So, it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8 NIV) This is a promise that, ultimately, every church must learn to seize as the final hope of our faith. It relieves ministers from the fear and weight of failure and opens congregations to the future’s seemingly unseen and unrealized possibilities. It is the only hope that cannot be removed from the Christian and Christian churches.

³⁸ Ref. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (Second Corinthians 5:17 NIV)

³⁹Olson, *Claiming Resurrection*, 3.

Still, waiting is required, and waiting is hard. Waiting on God seems the hardest of all. Yet, we continue to lead, worship, pray, and support those who belong to the church. I have long since gotten past the numbers game to find satisfaction in my ministry and labors. If I can continue to touch one life at a time with God's love, comfort them when dying, or stir them to consider some new insight of faith in my teaching and preaching, then it must be enough. Going through Gethsemane is always difficult. Walking in the darkness of not knowing what lies ahead and being overwhelmed by fears is never easy.

Thankfully, Barbara Brown Taylor writes some encouraging words: "Step 1 of learning to walk in the dark is to give up running the show. Next, you sign the waiver that allows you to bump into some things that may frighten you at first. Finally, you ask darkness to teach you what you need to know..."

"Meanwhile, here is some good news you can use: even when the light fades, and darkness falls – as it does every single day and every single life – God does not turn the world over to some other deity. Even when you cannot see where you are going, and no one answers when you call, this is not sufficient proof that you are alone. There is a divine presence that transcends all your ideas about it, along with all your language for calling it to your aid, which is not above using darkness as the wrecking ball that brings all your false gods down...Darkness is not dark to God; the night is as bright as the day."⁴⁰

At this point in my ministry and the life of the Chisholm United Methodist Church, we must wait, hold tightly to one another, listen passionately to the whispers of the Holy Spirit, and

⁴⁰ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, (HarperOne, 2015), 15-16.

never doubt that God is still with us. God promises a resurrection, and in His time, it will come, but what it looks like, we do not know.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barrett, Desmond. *Revitalizing the Declining Church from Death's Door to Community Growth*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2021.

Burge, Ryan P. *The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2021.

Carnes, Carrie. "The Importance of Story in Uncovering Values for Congregational Leadership," April 22, 2022. <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/candlerdmin/2022/04/22/the-importance-of-story-in-uncovering-values-for-congregational-leadership/>.

Crissman, Beth M., and Nancy B. Rankin. *Choosing the Faithful Path: A Bible Study for Discerning a Faithful Future*. Graham, North Carolina: Plowpoint Press, 2015.

Hammett, Edward H. *Recovering Hope for Your Church: Moving Beyond Maintenance and Missional to Incarnational Engagement*. St. Louis, MO: TCP, 2014.

Horton, Myles. *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*. 1st ed. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.

Hussey, Ian. "THE BIG NEWS ON SMALL CHURCHES: RE-EVALUATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF SMALL CHURCHES TO THE FULFILLMENT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION." *The Great Commission Research Journal* VOL. 7, NO. 2 (WINTER 16AD): 172–83.

Klett, Leah MariaAnn. "George Barna Identifies Biggest Threats Facing the Church: 'We've Reached a Time of Christian Invisibility.'" *The Christian Post*, May 21, 2024.

Nienaber, Susan. "Conversations at the Crossroads, Chisholm, MN," May 2024.

Nixon, Paul. *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!* 2nd edition. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2024.

Neuman, Scott. "The Faithful See Both Crisis and Opportunity as Churches Close across the Country." NPR, May 17, 2023.

O'Brien, Brandon J. *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, Effective*. Minneapolis, Minn: Bethany Housel, 2010.

Olson, Anna B. *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church: Freedom beyond Survival*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Parks, Lewis A. "A Better Script for Small Churches." Lewis Center for Church Leadership, May 26, 2010.

Parks, Lewis A. "A New Way to View Vitality in Smaller Congregations." Lewis Center for Church Leadership, October 14, 2015. <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/a-new-way-to-view-vitality-in-smaller-congregations/>.

Primo, Joe. "A Passionate Hope That Endures." *Grateful Living*. Accessed January 12, 2025. <https://grateful.org/resource/passionate-hope-endures/>.

Rankin, Nancy Burgin, and Beverly Bowyer Copley. *Checking Vital Signs: Assessing Your Local Church Potential*. Graham, North Carolina: Plowpoints Press, 2009.

Root, Andrew, and Blair D. Bertrand. *When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation Beyond More Money, Programs, and Innovation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2023.

Smith, Luther E. *Hope Is Here! Spiritual Practices for Pursuing Justice and Beloved Community*. First edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023.

Snyder, Howard A. "New Wineskins: With What Materials?" A Theology of New Wineskins for the 21st Century." *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 2001.

Stanton, Allen T. "The Church Family?" *Ministry Matters*, July 8, 2024.

Stanton, Allen T. "The Gift of Small Ministry." *Ministry Matters*, October 20, 2024.

Stanton, Allen T. *The Gift of Small: Embracing Your Church's Vocation*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2024.

Stanton, Allen T. "Vital Voices from Rural Churches." *Ministry Matters*, April 25, 2024.

Stewart, Teresa J. *The Small Church Advantage: Seven Powerful Worship Practices That Work Best in Small Settings*. Knoxville, Tennessee: Market Square Books, 2023.

Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. First edition. New York: HarperOne, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2014.

Watkins, Keith. "The Recovery of Vitality in Small Congregations." *MidStream* 33, no. 4 (1994): 391–419.

Wixson, Martin. "Pastoring in the Small Community" 12, no. 3 (2001): 60.

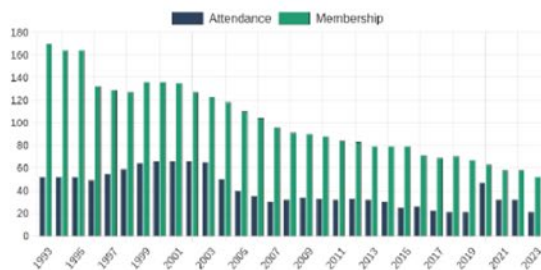
APPENDIX A

Charts for Chisholm UMC

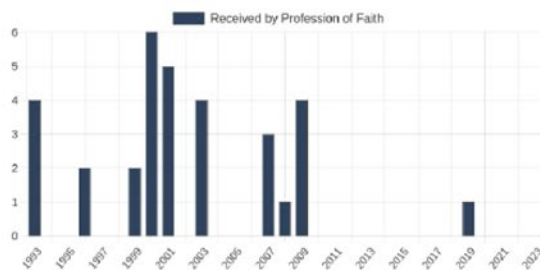
Church: Chisholm UMC

GCFA #: 641518

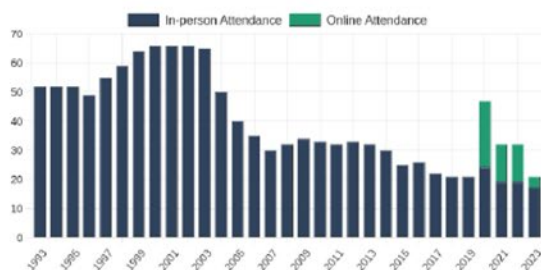
Attendance and Membership



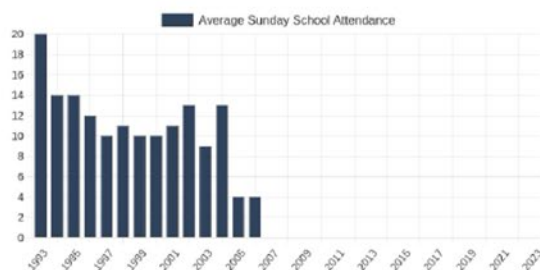
Received by Profession of Faith



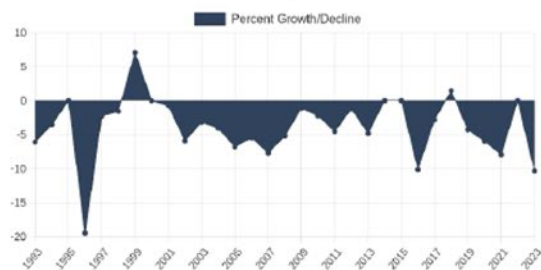
Average Attendance



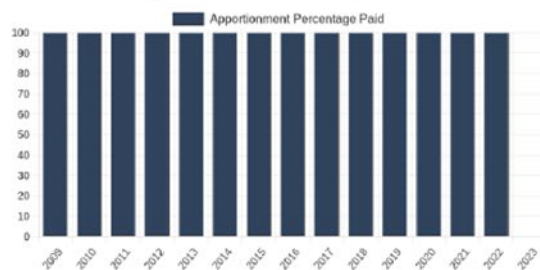
Year End Membership



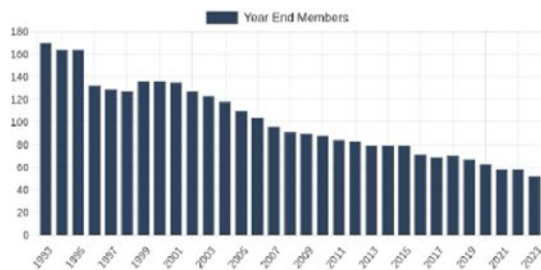
Membership Growth



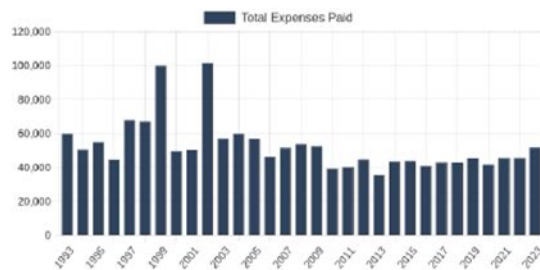
Apportionment Percentage Paid*



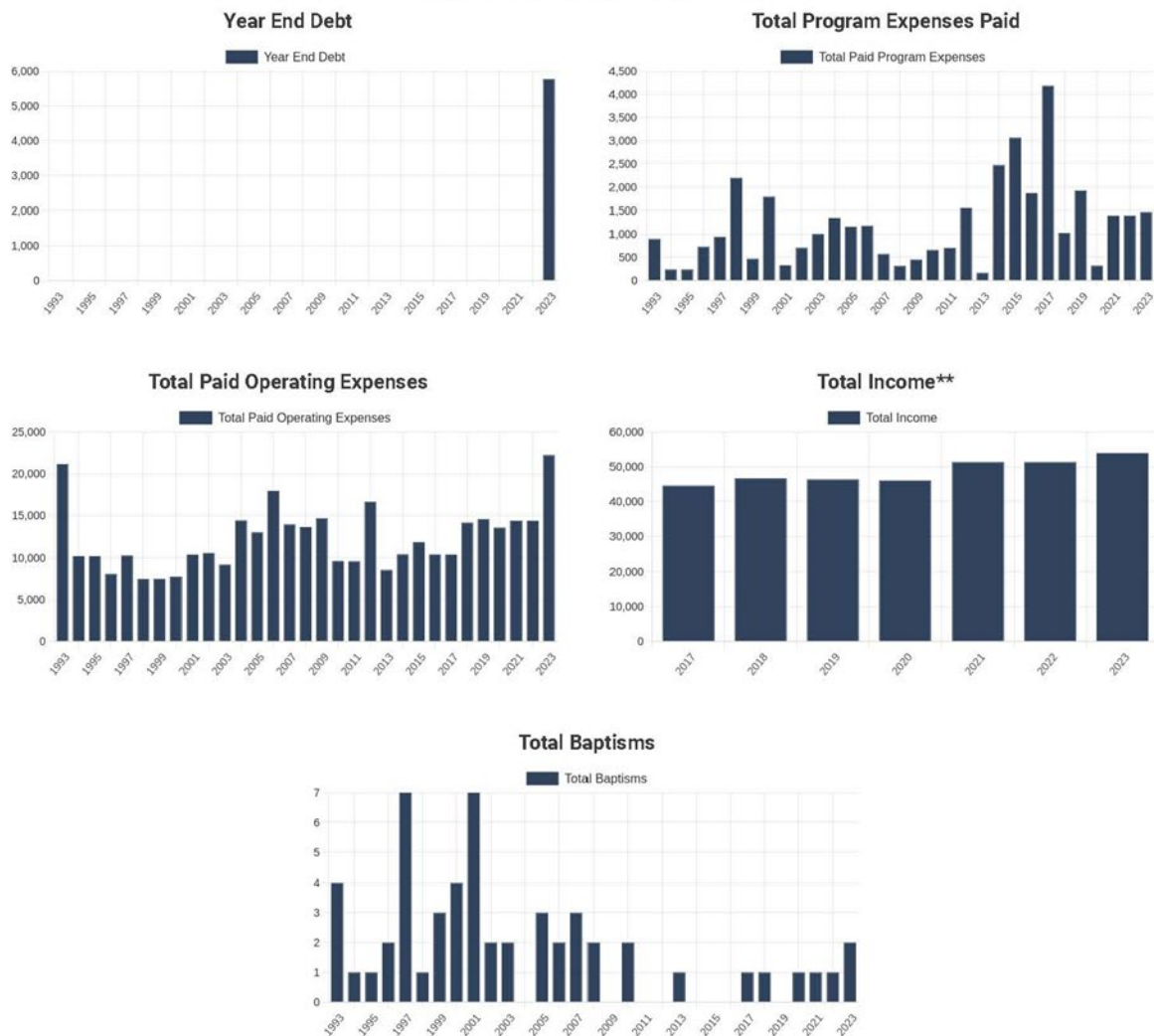
Year End Membership



Grand Total Paid



Charts for Chisholm UMC



* Data collection began in 2009

** Data collection began in 2017

Statistical Reports 1993-2023 from Council on Finance and Administration
– United Methodist Church (Accessed February 10, 2025)

APPENDIX B**Conversations at the Crossroads Process****Chisholm, MN****May 2024****Written Repost of Susan Nienaber, Director of Congregational Vitality**Background

Rev. Laurie Kantonen (District Superintendent) and Rev. Terry Tilton contacted me about having conversations at the Crossroads process with this congregation. The Conversations at the Crossroads process is offered upon the recommendation of the District Superintendent, with congregations facing a critical fork in the road and needing to discern their future. Sometimes, these churches have been in steep decline, but not always. Sometimes, some congregations have used this process or similar processes, such as the Healthy Church Initiative or Missional Church Consultation Initiative, to begin a new life cycle.

After sharing a few words with the congregation in worship and enjoying a delicious potluck and fellowship, I met with 16 members (in person or on the phone) to listen to their thoughts regarding the future of their church. Approximately four additional people were called, but I could not connect with them.

Findings

1. Approximately 15-18 people are attending worship now at Chisholm UMC, and the congregation has been able to pay all its bills to date. The building has been well-maintained and is accessible, and there are some cash reserves.
2. This congregation is made up of very sweet and loving people. I enjoyed all of my conversations with this church's members and participants and heard about their love and affection for one another. I often heard how much the people of Chisholm UMC enjoy each other and work well together.
3. Rev. Tilton's ministry and worship leadership are highly appreciated. Folks are also grateful that Pastor Terry has stepped in to lead and sustain this church over the years.
4. The age (the average age of church members is approximately 70) and declining health of the most active members are significant concerns. There is much concern about the congregation's survival, although most do not want to see the church close. There is also recognition that the population of the Chisholm community is also declining.
5. While there is a desire to continue programs and community gatherings, folks are tired. Some are experiencing declining health and cannot continue those activities. In particular, it is becoming very difficult to do fundraising activities.

6. A few folks have seriously considered the congregation's revitalization, but most could not think of good options for the future and acknowledged the challenges of trying to reach new people. Among the options shared were the need to promote or advertise the church better in the community; possible change in the worship service time 11 a.m. to 9 a.m.; develop a Wednesday night service; ask large United Methodist Churches to support small churches financially; add a Venmo giving option; get a young minister with children who lives and is active in the community; there have been previous conversations with the ELCA church across the street. Other ideas were to make the building available for more community functions such as AA groups and/or host ecumenical potlucks or adopt a family from the community. A few mentioned the need to have more potlucks to stay connected to one another.

Recommendations

1. A prayer season is significant during the Conversations at the Crossroads process. Pastor Terry could write a brief prayer for the congregation to center themselves and listen to God's voice regarding the future.
2. Many of the ideas from members of the Chisholm congregation fit into The Attractional Model of church growth. Unfortunately, with the current shifts in U.S. culture and society, this model is not a viable option for many congregations. (See Pastor Terry's paper "The Emmaus Way Fellowship: A micro-church model for rural and small communities.") In Pastor Terry's paper, he cites the Public Research Group in their 2020 survey, which found that the average congregation size across Christian denominations is less than half what it was in 2000 – down to 65 from 137. The Attractional Model is a sort of "if you build it or if you offer it, they will come" mindset and approach.
3. A Conversation with Pastor John Scheuer. John will soon begin his ministry with the Hibbing Wesley UMC Church. While he will have his hands full with his own full-time appointment, inviting John to come and speak with your church about the success that he has had in small communities would be beneficial.
4. A conversation with Pastor Terry about his recent paper mentioned above would be interesting.
5. Leveraging Your Property for Mission. Many churches are exploring ways to use the assets of their properties for missional purposes. Here is the link to a recent workshop by

APPENDIX C

NOTES OF TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2024

ADMINISTRATIVE/COUNCIL MEETING

The Ad/Council meeting included approximately one hour of discussion of the "Conversations at the Crossroads" report, and seven members were present.

A major topic of our September Ad/Council meeting was the report and recommendations of Rev. Susan Nienaber, Director of Congregational Vitality.

Ad/Council members expressed their appreciation to Pastor Tilton for his years of service to our church (since July 2012) and his leadership in keeping our church doors open. He stated that it had been his joy and pleasure to serve the church, and he anticipated, God-willing with continued health, that this would continue into the foreseeable near future.

He noted that the current church membership is 49, down from 73 when he began. Slowly, the congregation has been aging, and we have not attracted younger families to our congregation. Average attendance has shrunk from 24 to 16 in those years as well; however, we have an average of 16 attending via a video broadcast each week. We have not found a silver bullet to reverse those declines.

Our collective knowledge of unmet needs limits the initiation of new programs or projects in outreach to the community. Unfortunately, we do not have enough information to choose a new outreach program(s). However, it was suggested that we might contact the NE United Way in our community and make some inquiries.

It was the consensus that it would not be a lack of members but rather financial considerations that would ultimately close the church doors (when expenses and upkeep could not be paid). This led to a discussion about our church neighbors at Faith Lutheran Church to discuss how we might share ministries. Rev. Tilton was authorized to express our desires to the Bishop of the ELCA Lutheran Synod in our area and see if some dialogue might be initiated.

An invitation was also to be extended to invite Rev. John Scheuer, from Wesley UMC in Hibbing, to visit and explain some small-church renewal initiatives he has seen take place.

At this time, these were the only tangible expressions of initiative the church might take to impact its future. All present agreed that the church has been a big part of their lives, and they wished the fellowship to continue and thrive. How to make that happen is not easy to see or initiate as our members grow increasingly older.

APPENDIX D

NOTES OF CONVERSATION WITH REV. JOHN SCHEUER AT ADMINISTRATIVE/COUNCIL MEETING

Tuesday, November 5, 2024

Rev. John Scheuer, Pastor Wesley UMC, Hibbing MN

He is a second-career pastor of small churches in MN – Moose Lake, Barnum, Hill City, and Wesley UMC.

Talk to AD/COUNCIL MEMBERS ON SMALL CHURCH REVITALIZATION

Shared Hill City Church – 12 members attending 4 years ago and now upwards of 30-40 with a high of 57. Planned simple, free events to invite the public.

The issue is relationship building and showing you are alive and have a presence.

The target of 2 to 3 in six months. Do people recognize you as a vital force in the community? Use events and invite the community.

Example: Episcopal Church in Hibbing – small church – 2-hour Harvest Festival – games for kids, free food of sloppy joes

The issue is to get traffic in the building – something to offer

DO YOU HAVE A FACEBOOK PRESENCE?

I discovered more mileage out of Facebook with a few pictures, inviting them to come...having even 4 or 5 come to visit is a home run

HAVE A HOMECOMING SUNDAY.

Invite older and lost members back - send out cards of invitation – a place to reconnect with their old church family.

LIVE STREAM THE SERVICE ON FACEBOOK.

It does not have to be you doing it alone. What kind of church do you want to have?

APPENDIX E

