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Looking Back to Move Forward:
Navigating the Impact of Emotional Attachment to Subjective Interpretation of Past
Worship Experiences on Church Growth in Rural Methodist Congregations

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Abstract

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Recently, there have been concerns regarding the impact of nostalgia on the ministry and growth of the Christian church. Many of these concerns include attempts to canonize one style or genre of music, and more time devoted to protecting old practices than considering new ones with leadership decisions being made based on how they best represent and perpetuate the past. This project utilized the Nostalgia Inventory and Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey in order to explore if church growth is productively impacted when leadership engages the shared nostalgic longing of their parishioners in developing a ministry concerned around adherence to the tenets of the Christian faith and community outreach.

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I.   An Introduction

"Do not say, 'Why were the former days better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask this." – Ecclesiastes 7:10

Arriving at my new ministry location at the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, I decided to meet with the staff and gauge their perception of the church's current state of ministry. After discussions of social distancing and online services, we transitioned to visions of normalization and ministry goals. As the conversation progressed, the children/youth minister voiced their vision for the children/youth program. "Today, children are too distracted. They should sit on the front row so that the minister can watch them and make sure they are attentive. They should learn to appreciate sitting quite in the service and singing the old hymns like I did when I was a child," she told me. "I agree," another staff member said, "children and teens today are obsessed with their phones and tablets. When I was young, all we had was the hymnal and our Bibles. That lasted with me and that's what kids today need." Another sighed, "church was better back then. Had an impact on youth."

Our conversation devolved into reminisces of past experiences that were accompanied with emotional inflection and noticeable joy and comfort on the faces of those in nostalgic delight. When asked how many children and youth they had attending this 220-member church, they said, "five."

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a predominantly positive emotional experience that "entails revisiting cherished memories of persons and events."[1] Unlike stored memories, nostalgia is the elicited pleasure and sadness caused by memories from the past combined with a desire to experience that remembered event again.[2] In the situation above, the church staff members were allowing their shared desire to reexperience emotional attachments to memories of their past to interfere and influence their ministry outreach to children and youth.

The Impact of Nostalgia

Recently, there have been concerns regarding the impact of nostalgia on the ministry and growth of the Christian church.[3] Many of these concerns include attempts to canonize one style or genre of music, and more time devoted to protecting old practices than considering new ones. Also, budgets are generally absorbed on the physical and organizational institution without considering its mission while leaders are selected or dismissed according to how they best represent and perpetuate the past. Over reliance on nostalgia lead congregations to resurrect or recreating older actions to reflect former generations that always take priority over newer actions to impact future generations.[4]

Given the impact nostalgia has on our lives and the decisions we make, the purpose of this project is to explore the degree shared nostalgic connections of past experiences impact

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[1] Abeyta, Andrew A., Clay Routledge & Juhl, Jacob. (2015). Looking Back to Move Forward: Nostalgia as a Psychological Resource for Promoting Relationship Goals and Overcoming Relationship Challenges. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *109*(6), 1029

[2] Ibid.

[3] Manner, D. (2018). Is Worship Nostalgia Killing Your Church? ChurchLeaders. Found at https://churchleaders.com/worship/worship-articles/334133-is-worship-nostalgia-kililng-your-church.html

[4] Ibid.

parishioner's satisfaction with their current worship experience, and how that satisfaction impacts discipleship and church growth. Gaining a greater understanding of this impact will allow church leadership to engage in, and incorporate, the shared nostalgic longing of their parishioners in developing a ministry concentrated around adherence to the tenets of the Christian faith and community outreach into planning for the future trajectory of their church ministry.

Researchers have studied, and routinely demonstrated, how nostalgia impacts our lives with corporations implementing their research in shaping our behaviors. For example, researchers Huang, Huang, and Wyer Jr. demonstrated how nostalgia can be influenced and consumer behavior directed by organizations.[5] The impact of nostalgia on our lives is not limited to commercialization and corporate marketing, but our emotional attachments to past experiences influence our social resources and connections, as well as the approach-oriented social goals we set for our lives.[6]

This impact of nostalgia has also been found to influence younger adults as well as older adults. Clay Routledge conducted a survey involving undergraduate students in 2016, which found that as many as 79% reporting to be feeling nostalgic at least once a week, and 17% reporting that they experienced nostalgia at least once or twice a month.[7] Routledge concluded that even among young adults "nostalgia is a common experience," in contrast to the stereotype

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[5] Xun (Irene) Huang, Zhongqiang (Tak) Huang, & Wyer Jr., R. S. (2016). Slowing Down in the Good Old Days: The Effect of Nostalgia on Consumer Patience. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *43*(3), 372–387.
[6] Abeyta, A. A., Nelson, T. A., & Routledge, C. (2019). The pushes and pulls of the past: The effects of attachment-related avoidance and nostalgia on approach-oriented social goals. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *149,* 200–208; Sedikides, C., & Wildschut, T. (2019). The sociality of personal and collective nostalgia. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *30*(1), 123–173.
[7] Routledge, Clay. On Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource. (New York: Abingdon, 2016).

that "nostalgia is an emotion confined largely to older adults."[8] Nostalgic longing for the past is not exclusive to those with more lived past experiences and its impact and influence on our lives and relationships is generational.

Researchers Mallory, Spencer, Kimmes, and Pollitt demonstrated the impact of nostalgia on relationships and relationship satisfaction, and relationship seeking dynamics, including church relationships, and these actions depend, in part, on our past experiences.[9] Additionally, researchers Newman, Sachs, Stone, and Schwarz, as substantiated by Ye, Ng and Lam, found that our nostalgia for the past impacts our overall well-being and life satisfaction.[10] With such an impact on our personal and relational well-being, nostalgia can be that overriding force that influences our decision making process in both a positive, productive manner, or through negative, oppositional decisions.[11] Ultimately, researchers have found that the impact of nostalgia on our lives, by choice or influence, infuses our lives with meaning through fostering social connectiveness, and encouraging self-continuity of past, present and future self-perspective.[12] Since research suggests that nostalgia facilitates our understanding of meaning in life, it might be telling us that people are not completely satisfied with the current lifestyle.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Mallory, A. B., Spencer, C. M., Kimmes, J. G., & Pollitt, A. M. (2018). Remembering the good times: The influence of relationship nostalgia on relationship satisfaction across time. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *44*(4), 561–574.

[10] Newman, D. B., Sachs, M. E., Stone, A. A., & Schwarz, N. (2020). Nostalgia and well-being in daily life: An ecological validity perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *118*(2), 325–347; Ye, S., Ng, T. K., & Lam, C. L. (2018). Nostalgia and temporal life satisfaction. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, *19*(6), 1749–1762.

[11] Dimitriadou, M., Maciejovsky, B., Wildschut, T., & Sedikides, C. (2019). Collective nostalgia and domestic country bias. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, *25*(3), 445–457.

[12] van Tilburg, W. A. P., Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., & Vingerhoets, A. J. J. M. (2019). How nostalgia infuses life with meaning: From social connectedness to self-continuity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *49*(3), 521–532.

Congregation members' reliance on nostalgic experiences of their past worship experiences may be an indicator that they are not satisfied with their current experience and are trying to reshape their ministry location to satisfy their longing for the past. It is this influence of nostalgic connections to past worship experiences that impact parishioner's satisfaction with their current worship experience, and therefore impacts the trajectory of discipleship and church growth within a church ministry setting.

<div align="center">Nostalgia and Memory</div>

Dr. Krystine Batcho, an expert in the study of nostalgia, presents that nostalgia can be characterized or defined as a longing for or missing aspects of a person's personal lived past.[13] "Personal nostalgia means," according to Batcho, "that you are longing for or feeling good about aspects of your life that you already live through and have stored in your memory."[14] Memory, therefore, houses the past experiences that are longed for by our nostalgic feelings. However, Dr. Batcho indicates that "we have decades of cognitive research that show that the general default is that memories are not accurate, and that's true for all kinds of memories."[15] Fundamentally, we pick and choose our memories, and as a result we distort them to some extent.

In fact, we tend to not only distort personal memories but also collective memories past down through generations. For example, when asked if the American culture and way of life have changed for the worse since the 1950s, the 2021 American Values Survey by the Public

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[13] Luna, K. (2019, November). *Speaking of psychology: Does nostalgia have a psychological purpose?* American Psychological Association. Retrieved July 6, 2021, from https://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/nostalgia.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

Policy Research Institute found that Christian evangelical Protestants (70%), Catholics (60%),

mainline Protestants (67%), and African American Protestants (50%) felt life in America in the

1950s was better than in 2021.[16] Many of the respondents who held a nostalgic longing for the

American life in the 1950's were not actually alive during that period of American history. This

longing for "the good old days" in the United States indicates that "if people are unhappy for any

reason with how things are today, they're more likely then to experience this sense that things

must have been better in the past. How far they have to go in terms of their longing can depend

upon how much they know about history."[17]

The "it was better in the good old days" phenomenon is very different from someone who

says, "I think today is a very stressful time. When I was growing up, I believe it was a less

stressful time." The reason for this is because our memories are susceptible to distortion and

therefore not concretely reliable. They're not necessarily accurate to what things really were like

and are based on our impressions of what we believe experiences were like in the past. This is

the problem many churches face today. Some parishioners feel dissatisfaction with the current

state of Christian ministry and tend to compensate with an over idealized version of ministry that

was "better" in the past, whether it is a lived past or glamorized version of another generation's

past. "We do idealize things on occasion," Dr. Batcho suggests, but she also presents that, "this

is a two-edged sword because just as we can idealize and romanticize and therefore distort the

accuracy of memories, we can go in the other direction."[18]

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[16] Jones, R. (2021, October). *PRRI 2021 American Values Survey Total = 2,508 online ...* American Values Survey. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PRRI-Oct-2021-AVS_Topline.pdf

[17] Luna.

[18] Ibid.

A Benefit of Nostalgia: Generational Communal Connection

Personalized nostalgia can be limiting when it is over relied on, idealized and romanticized leaving the accuracy of memories distorted and unreliable, however communal nostalgia could serve a number of productive functions for the individual and community. As previously noted, nostalgia influences our social connections and goals, as well as our well-being and overall life satisfaction. "The thing that ties them all together," observes Dr. Batcho, "is that nostalgia is an emotional experience that unifies."[19]

For example, when researchers have studied the greatest generation of the 1930s and 40s, many of whom experienced the horrors of the Great Depression, they expected no nostalgic longing for such times. However, they found that the horrors of deprivation, hunger and financial struggles were not the deciding factor for or against the influence of nostalgia. An individual's personality or their psychological well-being has more of an impact on the influence of nostalgia on their lives than the memories themselves.[20] "If you have two individuals one of whom is really happy in their current life and they're emotionally doing just fine. They might go back and remember bad things and then laugh about them" and recognize their achievements and blessings they have received since their past experiences.[21] On the other hand, someone who is suffering from "depression or an anxiety disorder. They might go back and think about the past and then let that further sadden them rather than make them happy by comparison with how far they've come."[22] A person's current mood and mental state is an important motivator when

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

understanding how nostalgia influences our actions today. As a result, nostalgia helps to unite

our sense of who we are, our self, our identity over time. "Because over time we change

constantly we change in incredible ways," according to Dr Batcho, "We're not anywhere near the

same as we were when we were three years old, for example. Nostalgia by motivating us to

remember the past in our own life helps to unite us to that authentic self and remind us of who

we have been and then compare that to who we feel we are today."[23]

However, nostalgia is also communal in nature. Shared experience and the way others

who shared in those past experiences react to reminiscing about them influences our view of

those past experiences.[24] We tend to gravitate toward people who foster the productive

experiences that we can bring to today from our past. Therefore, if someone is always being

negative by saying, "Do you remember how bad it was in the past?" They exert an influence on

our memory retrieval process that is more likely to stimulate nostalgia in a negative way. In

contrast, if we associate with people who are positive about the experiences in our past, whether

those experiences were good or bad, interaction with them could bring out the best of nostalgic

memory. Therefore, social influence today can impact our nostalgic longing for past experiences

no matter the context of those experiences. As a result, a church congregation that approaches

past worship experiences in a positive and communal way may have a greater positive impact on

each member's nostalgic longing for past worship experiences.

Dr. Batcho also recognizes that "one of the healthiest forms of nostalgia throughout

human history has always been to connect each generation to the next. In that sort of bond, you

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[23] Ibid.
[24] Huang, Huang, and Wyer Jr.

pass down to the next generation the best of the past."[25] She notes that, "Just because we are oriented toward progress, doesn't mean that there isn't something of value that we might have forgotten from the past." For example, advances in technology and medicine have built on past advances from previous generations. Are there experiences or things that were present in previous generations that we are not doing as productively today? For example, are we engaging in community outreach, discipleship or even worship as effectively as we might? As Dr. Batcho reasons, "It used to be that when parents had children, they relive their own nostalgic memories by reading children's books that they had read to them to their own children."[26] Reliving or re-instituting past worship or ministry experiences as a means of fostering church growth and outreach only provides today's generation with part of the equation. It ignores where they are today in their ministry and their Christian journey. In the alternative, neglecting previous generational experiences to build upon creates a hollow ministry without the depth of the past. The benefit of nostalgia in ministry is that it brings generations together in building for a more effective and meaningful experience in worship and discipleship through shared emotional experiences of past and present through liturgies, hymns, imagery and fellowship.

<div align="center">Theology and Nostalgia</div>

From Justin Martyr to George Whitefield, Origen to Martin Luther or Augustine to Fanny Crosby, the Christian church has relied on shared passed experiences and traditions passed down for generations throughout its history. In fact, John Wesley "appealed to the Bible as the primary justification for his teachings," but also "explicitly appeals to reason, experience, *the historical*

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[25] Luna.
[26] Ibid.

traditions of the Church of England and the primitive church" to add sources to his biblical arguments.[27] The United Methodist Church's The *Book of Discipline* encourages the consideration of historical tradition by stating that "the living core of the Christian faith" is "revealed in Scripture, *illumined by tradition*, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason."[28] The Christian longing for past experiences can be positive and encouraging in building deep personal connections with those who have come before and those we worship with today. However, appeal to Christian tradition or identity can also be negative and manipulated into a faith that the Apostolic Fathers would not recognize today.

A wide range of right-wing movements, for example, are bound together by their adherence to a nostalgic vision of the United States as a "Christian nation."[29] Researcher Ruth Braunstein writes that, "The tempting thing about the mood of sentimental nostalgia is its precondition: forgetfulness. What Patriots forget is that the 'sister' of nostalgia (to use Carl Jung's term) is brutality . . . Christian Patriots are blind to the despoliations, enslavements, rapes, and murders of the past that have provided them with the rights and privileges they enjoy today."[30] The extreme Religious Right, for example, "sacralizes the nation's founding" through their references to the "Founders and virtuous ancestors" who "in the jeremiadic tradition . . . represent a standing reproach to degenerate present-day Americans."[31] As extreme as this example may be, it illustrates the dangerous slope Christians travel when solely appealing to the

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[27] Gunter, W. Stephen, Scott Jones, Ted Campbell, Rebekah Miles and Randy Maddox. <u>Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation</u>. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), pp. 41, 42.
[28] United Methodist Church. <u>The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church</u>. (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), p. 66.
[29] Braunstein, R. (2021). The "Right" History: Religion, Race, and Nostalgic Stories of Christian America. *Religions 12*, 95.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

nostalgic interpretations of the traditions of the past in isolation without appreciating the limitations of such an appeal.[32]

The importance of a person's religious faith and the influence nostalgic interpretations of faith traditions of the past can clearly encompass most, if not all, aspects of that person's life for bad but also good. Christopher Deacy, for example, researched nostalgic reflections of religion and found that implicit discussion of religious experiences in relation to "reminiscing" of one's past elicited more success "in opening up a conversation about the role and location of religion than can be established when we focus exclusively on its more traditional, explicit manifestations."[33] Deacy writes that, "according to the tenets of Implicit Religion, although not everything *is* implicitly religious, anything *can* be, and can say something important not just about the goal or *telos* that a person or community may be striving toward."[34] In interacting with a person with high nostalgic longing, we must understand that "Religion is the life-blood, the inner power, the ultimate meaning of all life," and the "'sacred' or the 'holy' inflames, imbues, inspires, all reality and all aspects of existence," including the "mode of behavior exhibited."[35] It is this expression of implicit religious connections based on shared nostalgic longing that have permeated the ministry contexts that have been experienced and observed during the period of this project.

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[32] Dimitriadou.

[33] Deacy, C. (2020). Nostalgia and the 'New Visibility' of Religion. *Religions 11*, 267.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

Ministry Settings

During the course of this exploration into the impact of nostalgic longing on ministry growth of a rural church, I was transfer from a United Methodist Church in rural Alabama (McIntosh United Methodist Church) to a United Methodist church in Florida (Blountstown United Methodist Church). These two ministry contexts present similar challenges to church growth that center around nostalgic longing while both congregations share in the desire for productive church growth, especially among the younger demographic. A review of these two contexts illustrates the common struggles each face in ministry and growth, both explicit and implicit.

McIntosh United Methodist Church

McIntosh United Methodist Church (UMC) is located in McIntosh, Alabama in Washington County North of Mobile, Alabama and has experienced a population loss from 238 in 2010 to 220 in 2018.[36] The racial makeup of the town of McIntosh is 55.23% Native American, 43.03% African American, 1.33% Caucasian, 0.41% from two or more races and 0.41% Hispanic.[37] This unique racial makeup is due to McIntosh being located near a Native American reservation. 13.5% of the population are under the poverty line with the median household income being $28,214.[38] The average age of members of McIntosh UMC is 54 with the racial makeup being 92% Caucasian and 8% Asian. 73% of congregation members live outside of the town of McIntosh and 68% are retirees. The total membership of McIntosh UMC is 64 with an average attendance of around 23.

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[36] United States Census Bureau, *Population and Housing Unit Estimates*, Found at: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest/data/tables.2018.html
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.

McIntosh UMC has a direct relationship with the conflict that split Methodists in 1844 and continues to influence their nostalgic attachment to past worship and communal identification. During the Methodist Episcopal Church's General Conference of 1844, Ohio delegates unsuccessfully challenged Bishop James O. Andrew's ability to function in his capacity as General Superintendent due to his ownership of salves.[39] The action against Andrew sparked Southern Methodists to form the Methodist Episcopal Church South.[40] In 1860, the same Bishop James O. Andrew constructed what is referred to as Andrew's Chapel, one of the few remaining log churches still standing in the United States, and now called McIntosh UMC. Until 1952, Andrew's Chapel was used for services and church ministry that impacted generations of parishioners and their families. The current church was constructed in 1952, but Andrew's Chapel has remained a source of pride for McIntosh UMC congregation members as passed down through generations of church members and their families.

The nostalgic impact on McIntosh UMC parishioners is that of a small-town family church that continues to be comprised of descendants of two main families. The facilities, programs and organization of the church have not been changed for decades in an attempt to maintain family traditions or relive worship experiences of their past. As a result, major events for the church are centered around maintaining tradition rather than community outreach or growing the church. For example, McIntosh UMC holds an annual homecoming celebration attended by members of the major families of the church, and a Memorial Day recognition in Andrew's Chapel that remembers all veterans buried in the cemetery surrounding the chapel,

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[39] Richey, Russell E., Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean M. Schmidt, <u>American Methodism: A Compact History</u>, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012).
[40] Ibid., p. 86.

including those veterans of the American Civil War with Confederate flags placed on their graves. Given that most parishioners are related, relationships have more of a family tone with congregation members interacting with each other regularly outside of church at family functions.

The perceived uniqueness of McIntosh UMC's conflict between the nostalgic longing for past ministry experiences with the explicit understanding of the unsustainability of the church without new, younger membership is in actuality more reality than perception. In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that only 65% of American adults described themselves as Christians, down 12 percentage points over the past decade.[41] There is a fear of dwindling membership that is in conflict with a nostalgic longing for the worship of the member's youth and past generational worship style that fosters resistance to change and outreach at McIntosh UMC and is shared by my second ministry setting, Blountstown United Methodist Church (UMC).

<center>Blountstown United Methodist Church</center>

In 2020, I was appointed to pastor Blountstown UMC in Blountstown, Florida which presents as a very traditional Methodist congregation that relies on the worship structure traditionally described in the *Methodist Hymnal*. Blountstown, Florida located in Liberty County has had a consistent population from 2,516 in 2010 to 2,443 in 2019.[42] The racial makeup of Blountstown is 65.18% Caucasian, 31.79% African American, 1.27% Native American, 0.33% Asian, 0.08% Pacific Islander, 0.29% from two or more races, and 0.70% Hispanic.[43] 18.5% of

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[41] Pew Research Center. *In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at Rapid Pace*. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. (2020, June 9). Retrieved May 5, 2021, from https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/
[42] United States Census Bureau.
[43] Ibid.

the population are under the poverty line with the median household income being $30,880.[44] The average age of members of Blountstown UMC is 48 with the racial makeup being 95% Caucasian and 5% African American. The total membership of Blountstown UMC is 223 with an average attendance of around 80 and impacted by the current COVID-19 pandemic with many members worshiping through an online worship option which began in 2021.

Blountstown UMC was founded and built in 1896 and rebuilt in 1914. The current structure was completed with the first worship service being held on July 4, 1943, and dedicated on May 19, 1946. The Fellowship Hall to the church was designed and erected on April 9, 1989, and rebuilt in 2021 after destruction by fire. Similar to McIntosh UMC, Blountstown UMC is proud of their heritage and tradition as illustrated by the original bell in the current, rebuilt steeple, and original memorial windows in the sanctuary bearing the names of passed members from prominent families currently attending the church. The sanctuary is of a traditional design with an arched ceiling, memorial carillon and swell pipe organ as the focal point of the sanctuary. The aesthetics of the worship environment compliments the congregation's expected traditional worship experience that, for some, is designed to satisfy their nostalgic longing for the worship environment of their youth.

Music has clearly been the consistent focus of worship at Blountstown UMC and provides that connection between the nostalgic impression of past worship with the current worship experience. For example, many traditional sanctuaries engrave the theme "Do This in Remembrance of Me" on, or near, their arlter while Blountstown UMC has "Sing unto the Lord" engraved in large letters under the pipes of the organ that expands the length of the pulpit and

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44 Ibid.

choir loft. However, the congregation's appreciation for worship music is primarily limited to traditional hymns and generally accompanied by piano or organ. Given the congregation's adherence to traditional worship patterns and music styles, it is clear that this church is composed of lifelong members with few newer members, as indicated by the limited numbers joining the church within the last three years. This presents a congregation that desires a worship experience resembling the experience of their youth that could in return be discouraging for visitors who do not share in that narrow nostalgic longing.

Blountstown UMC and McIntosh UMC's conflict between the nostalgic longing for past ministry experiences with the unsustainability of church ministry without new, younger membership is illuminated by recent research. In 2019, the Pew Research Center released a study of church membership and growth that found the top concerns for the Christian church being "creating disciples of Christ," "youth involvement," "members' spiritual growth," and "decline in membership."[45] In 2021, Gallop found that church membership in the United States has fallen below the majority for the first time at 47%, down from 70% in 2000.[46] The fear of dwindling membership is shared by many Christian church leaders today as they attempt to sustain an active ministry that foster's church growth.

II.   The Problem

"Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'" - Luke 9:62

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[45] Pew Research Center.

[46] Jones, J. M. (2021, November 20). *U.S. church membership falls below majority for first time.* Gallup.com. Retrieved December 11, 2021, from https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx.

It appears that Blountstown UMC and McIntosh UMC's membership share in their desire for church growth while also presenting a nostalgic longing for past ministry experiences that are maintained in their current ministry environment. The question for these ministry settings, as well as the Christian church in general, is to what extent does nostalgic connections of past experiences impact parishioner's satisfaction with their current worship experience, and how that satisfaction impacts discipleship and church growth?[47] And if there is an impact, then how can it be navigated to foster church growth rather than impede it?

In order to answer these two questions, a clear understating of the impact of nostalgic longing on our experiences, including worship, has been explored above. However, there must also be a clear understanding of what constitutes membership decline in the Christian church and attempt to concretely define it for the purposes of this study.

<p style="text-align:center;">Defining the Decline of Church Membership</p>

The 2021, the Gallop poll that found that church membership had fallen to 47%, down from 70% in 2000, also noted that the decrease span all generations in adulthood, including baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials.[48] However, it should be noted that Gallop indicated that a significant factor for this decrease can be attributed, in part, to overall population change with baby boomers passing away and younger generations not replacing them in the overall population of church members.[49] Regardless, population replacement does not fully explain the decline in church membership since adults in the older generations have shown roughly double-

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[47] Manner.
[48] Jones, J.
[49] Ibid.

digit decreases from two decades ago (1998).[50] Additionally, church membership is down even

more, 15 percent, in the past decade among millennials.[51] When reviewing these numbers, it

should be clarified that they do not report those who have abandoned their Christian faith. These

numbers show a decline in membership in organized religion and/or religious preference, not a

decline in the belief in the tenets of the Christian faith or overall spirituality.[52]

The Pew Research Center presents that this group of people accounting for the decline in

church membership may better be addressed as "spiritual but not religious."[53] Pew found that

"about a quarter of U.S. adults (27%) now say they think of themselves as spiritual but not

religious" when asked, "Do you think of yourself as a religious person, or not?" and "Do you

think of yourself as a spiritual person, or not?"[54] This group indicated a broad-base, occurring

among men and women; whites, blacks and Hispanics; people of many different ages and

education levels; and among Republicans and Democrats.[55] Of this group, 35% reported to

being from a Protestant background, while 14% identified as having a Catholic background.[56]

In fact, another Pew survey noted, "The drop in religiosity in the U.S. has been limited to

religious 'nones' (that is, those who describe themselves as atheists or agnostics and those who

say they have no particular religion). The growth of the unaffiliated population and their

decreasing religiosity have been the main factors behind the emergence of a less religious public

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Lipka, M., & Gecewicz, C. (2017, September 6). *More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved June 9, 2021, from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

overall. But, interestingly, the rise in spirituality has been happening among both highly religious people and the religiously unaffiliated."[57] Also, it should be noted that among the "nones," there was a 5-point rise in the share of those who say they frequently feel spiritual peace (from 35% in 2007 to 40% in 2014).[58]

What do these numbers tell us about those who are leaving the Christian church in general and organized religion as a whole? Many conclusions can be drawn from such results, but they clearly show that the make-up of those leaving the church, or are not receptive to what the modern church has to offer, are not exclusive to the young. The decrease in church membership is across generations, genders, racial background, political affiliations, and educational levels. An approach to church growth should not be solely focused on attracting one demographic while neglecting the needs, interests, and desires of other demographics. Attending to the youth alone cannot save the Christian church.

These survey results also indicate that while membership in the Christian church is declining, spirituality in the overall population is increasing. This phenomenon could possibly be in part due to people leaving the modern Christian church yet remaining spiritual in their daily lives. The Pew Research Center also found that those who claim to be atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," reported an increase in spirituality and seeking a spiritual connection to something greater than themselves.[59] The overall population is seeking. However, the modern

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[57] Masci, D., & Lipka, M. (2016, January 21). *Americans may be getting less religious, but feelings of spirituality are on the rise*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved June 9, 2021, from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/
[58] Ibid.
[59] Masci.

Christian church, including Blountstown UMC and McIntosh UMC, does not seem to be providing them with the connection that are in search of.

III.   Project Design

"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead," - *Philippians 3:13*

Research has shown that nostalgic longings for the past could function as an inhibitor to change, or a facilitator for social connections that have the potential to bring generations together.[60] The pre-COVID-19 pandemic plan for this study was to bring generations together physically in order to foster connectiveness around their shared nostalgic longings, if any. However, given that this is a generational study the need for social distancing and concern for the health and safety of participants due to the pandemic precluded any avenue for group intergenerational discussion. Additionally, the limited technological resources of some of the participants, precluded the use of technology to compensate for the health and safety concerns, restrictions and limitations.

The current study is designed to explore the degree nostalgia impacts congregation members from Blountstown UMC and McIntosh UMC as it relates to their satisfaction with their current worship experience. This information was also compared to participants understanding and acceptance of the basic tenets of the Christian faith in their lives and their results of church satisfaction of their current ministry environment. Finally, this information was analyzed between generations in order to distinguish shared nostalgic longing and satisfaction with the modern church worship experience.

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[60] Juhl, J., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Xiong, X., & Zhou, X. (2021). Nostalgia Promotes Help Seeking by Fostering Social Connectedness. *Emotion, 21(3),* 631-643.

Nostalgia Inventory

The Nostalgia Inventory used for this study was developed and researched by Dr. Krystine Batcho, who based her Inventory on the definition of nostalgia as a longing for, or missing, aspects of a person's personal lived past.[61] "Personal nostalgia," according to Batcho, "means that you are longing for or feeling good about aspects of your life that you already live through and have stored in your memory."[62] Her Inventory was developed in 1995 and measures how often and how deeply the respondent feels nostalgic based on a nine point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much" with the higher the score the more nostalgic a person tends to be.[63] The Inventory itself assesses nostalgic areas, such as family, music, "the way people were," past feelings, "having someone to depend on," "the way society was," and church experiences. This allows for a wide range of nostalgic experiences to be recorded for a generalized assessment of the respondent's level over nostalgic longing.

Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey

The Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey was developed from a collection of surveys designed to assess parishioner satisfaction with their church environment. The Survey asked the respondents to indicate their agreement with various statements on a five-point scale ranging from "Definitely Untrue," "Hardly True," "Somewhat True," "Mostly True," and "Definitely True," with an option for those questions respondents are "unsure" about their answer or indorsement. Numerical values were assigned to each response option from "1" for

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[61] Luna.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Batcho, Krystine I. (1995). Nostalgia: A Psychological Perspective. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 80, 131-143.

"Definitely Untrue' and "5" for "Definitely True," with the value of "0" assigned to "Unsure" responses.

Tenets of the Christian faith assessed included the uniqueness of Jesus (Virgin Birth), oneness of God (The Trinity), necessity of the cross (Salvation), resurrection, and inspiration of Scripture. Church satisfaction was composed of two parts, general church practices and personal practices or expectations as they relate to their Christian faith. Statements related to church practices include, "Our church's activities clearly reflect our commitment to reaching the unchurched," "Our church lives out the gospel of Jesus Christ in our community," "Our church strongly encourages us to build relationships with one another," "Our church encourages people to develop relationships with unchurched people in the community," "Our church shows that it is very forgiving by practicing forgiveness in our daily lives," and "Our church strongly encourages reliance on the Holy Spirit in everyday life."

The church satisfaction survey also included questions in order to assess participant's personal religious beliefs and practices. Statements related to personal practices include, "I believe I can and do love people of my church with whom I might deeply disagree on some things," "I regularly engage in activities that positively affect the broader community," "I intentionally build relationships with non-Christians," "I am growing in my sense of belonging in my congregation," "Building relationships with others of different background (racial, social, economic) makes me a stronger Christian," "I trust that I will be cared for by people in my church when I am hurting," and "Aside from family members, I have a close friend in my church."

Participants

The participants in this study were from three pools of participants, Blountstown UMC (BUMC), McIntosh UMC (MUMC) and volunteers from an online University setting that self-identified as being a member of the "nones" or "spiritual but not religious" group (SBNR). The SBNR group served as a secular reference point for this study with the BUMC and MUMC groups serving as the primary research groups. Together the groups consisted of 71 total participants with 69% (49) female and 31% (22) male. The racial makeup of the participants consisted of 77.5% (55) Caucasian, 11.3% (8) African American, 8.5% (6) Asian, and 2.9% (2) Hispanic.

The participants at BUMC/MUMC made-up 76% (54) of the total research group. The SBNR group consisted of 24% (17) of the total participants and was the most diverse group with 100% of African Americans and Hispanics belonging to the SBNR group.

The participants were placed into four generational groups based on their age: "young adult" (24 and below), "adult" (25-44), "middle age" (45-65), and "older adult" (66 and above). For the overall participant group there were 20 "young adult," 12 "adult," 19 "middle age," and 20 in the "older adult" category. The two churches, BUMC and MUMC, accounted for all the "older adult" category members and the SBNR group accounted for 60% (12) of the "young adult" participants.

Process

Given the limitations placed on social contact due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the health and safety of many of the high-risk participants, direct contact was supplanted through the use of direct mailing, email and online surveys. This eliminated the option for group discussion

and follow-up with participants directly with in person contact and discussion. Additionally, participants were allowed to complete the Inventory and Survey anonymously in order to elicit open-minded and impartial responses without unintended influence from the position and status within the institution held by the researcher.

Participants were volunteers from BUMC, MUMC and the SBNR groups who responded to an open request for respondents with a description of the study as being related to the study of nostalgia. BUMC and MUMC participants were requested through church communication (newsletters and bulletin) for two weeks, while the SBNR group participants were requested via email and class announcement for two weeks. Each individual participant was informed of the confidential nature of the Inventory and Survey and asked to rate the statements or questions to the best of their ability. The BUMC and MUMC groups were encouraged to rate the Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey as they related to their current ministry setting. The SBNR group was offered the Nostalgia Inventory but not the Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey. Feedback was encouraged but not required. There were no additional attempts to elicit comment outside the parameters of the Inventory and Survey.

BUMC/MUMC consisted of 54 precipitants of 8 "young adult," 8 "adult," 18 "middle age," and 20 "older adult." The SBNR group totaled 17 participants and consisted of 12 "young adult," 4 "adult," and 1 "middle age." Together the groups considered of a total of 71 participants.

Each Inventory and Survey was received through email or traditional mail with little contact between participants. Individual inquiries, comments and or feedback were offered through email, traditional mail, and telephone communication. Inventories and Surveys were

marked to indicate their respective group. Responses were also categorized within each group by their generational placement.

Participant's responses on the Inventory and Survey were calculated by totaling the numbered response for each item and averaging them for the participant's overall score. For the Inventory, the higher the score the more nostalgic a person tends to be. Likewise, the Survey responses were also averaged to calculate the participant's overall score. The higher the score, the more satisfied a person is with their ministry experience. These averaged scores were then calculated and averaged for each respective generational category. Finally, the SBNR group's responses were separated from the BUMC and MUMC group results for comparison and analysis. The BUMC and MUMC group's responses were combined and compared with the SBNR's participant's responses.

IV. Findings

"but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back. But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved." – *Hebrews 10:38-39*

Nostalgia Inventory

The results of the Nostalgia Inventory showed an elevated nostalgic score across all generational groups above the average of 5.0 for the Inventory. Overall, the average nostalgia level for all participants combined was 7.0. The BUMC/MUMC group also averaged a nostalgia level of 7.0, while the SBNR group's level was slightly higher at 7.3. This indicates a consistent nostalgic longing between the religious affiliated and those who are spiritual but claim no religious affiliation.

The results for the generational age groups indicated strong nostalgic longing for the "young adult" group at 8.1, which was also the highest age group nostalgic level across the BUMC/MUMC (8.4) and SBNR (7.7) groups. The overall nostalgic level for the "adult" generational group was 6.9, with the "middle age" group level at 7.1 and the "older adult" level at 5.7. The "older adult" nostalgic level was the lowest for the BUMC/MUMC group. The SBNR did not have any participants in the "older adult" generational group.

The generational nostalgic levels for the BUMC/MUMC group reflected the overall findings with the "young adult" generational group registering the highest levels of nostalgic longing (8.4) and the "older adult" group registering the lowest (5.7). The "adult" generational group registered a nostalgic level of 6.4 and the "middle age" registered an average of 7.4. All generational groups endorsed a nostalgic level above the average for the Inventory.

The SBNR group reported the highest level of nostalgic long at 7.3, compared to 7.0 of the BUMC/UMC group. There were no participants from the "older adult" generational category for the SBNR group. The "young adult" group registered a nostalgic level of 7.7, with the "adult" group at 7.4 and the "middle age" group registering a 6.8 level.

<div align="center">Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey</div>

The "Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey" was only offered to participants from the BUMC/MUMC group consisting of 54 members. The survey consisted of two parts registering the participant's satisfaction with their church experience and personal Christian faith experience. Given that the participants were active church members, their satisfaction with the overall church experience was elevated in the positive direction with an

overall satisfaction score of 4.3 out of 5 across all generational groups. The personal faith experience average scores were also elevated at 4.6 out of 5.

Within the generational age groups, participants in the "young adult" group reported the lowest satisfaction with their religious experiences at their church at 3.9 out of 5. The "adult" group reported a satisfaction score of 4.4, with the "middle age" group an average of 4.3 and the "older adult" group scoring highest level of satisfaction at 4.8. When it comes to a person's personal religious faith, all BUMC/MUMC generational groups indicted strong religious beliefs with the "older adult" group scoring the highest with an average score of 4.8 out of 5. The "young adult" group scored an average of 4.6, with the "adult" group at 4.7 and the "middle age" group with the lowest overall strength in their own personal religious experience at 4.4.

V. Evaluation/Assessment

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." – *Jeremiah 29:11*

Christian houses of worship are places that elicit intense emotional connection through experiencing the presence of God through worship and praise, as well as through communal support and fellowship with those sharing in that emotional experience. The results of the Nostalgia Inventory and Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey indicate both strong nostalgic longing for past experiences and committed devotion to a person's personal religious faith. Additionally, respondents who are spiritual but not religiously affiliated shared in a heightened nostalgia level with those respondents from the two United Methodist churches who are actively participating in organized Christian ministry. There appears to be a share

endorsement for participants who are longing for either past experiences they have experienced, or their perception of past generation's experience.

Across all groups and generations of participants who desire greater spiritual experiences, there was a heightened longing for "the way society was" with that item being rated on average at 8.3 out of 9 for the BUMC/MUMC group and 8.0 for the SBNR group. Additionally, there appears to be a heightened longing for "the way people were" item which averaged 7.7 for the BUMC/MUMC group and 7.0 for the SBNR group. These results indicate a shared longing for a time that was perceived to be better than the current social environment the participants experience currently. There appears to be a shared "seeking" experience between those who are participants in the Christian faith and those who are spiritual but not religious. This shared desire is open to the impact of nostalgic longing on the groups, yet also presents an opportunity for the destructive use of nostalgia that discourages connectiveness between the groups.

<div align="center">Destructive Nostalgia</div>

Dr Batcho observes that the "it was better in the good old days" phenomenon results from our memories being distorted and not faithful. [64] They are not accurate to what things really were like and are based on our impressions of what we believe experiences were like in the past. This is indicated with the results if the Inventory when compared to the Survey. The parishioners who scored the lowest in church satisfaction related to modern church practices were also the ones who scored the highest on the Nostalgia Inventory items related to personal rather communal nostalgia. For example, BUMC/MUMC participants with the lowest church satisfaction scores on these areas also were the participants who rated the highest nostalgic long

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[64] Luna.

for specific "places," "toys," "pets," and "things you did." They also were among those who had the strongest longing for "church" and "your house." In contrast, the participants who scored the lowest church satisfaction on areas of how their church engaged in outreach and community support were more nostalgic for social items on the Nostalgic Inventory, such as "friends," "having someone to depend on," "the way society was," and "the way people were."

The rigidity fostered by reliance on personal nostalgic longing in order to experience satisfaction within a person's worship experience creates an environment of resistance to change.[65] Those members of BUMC/MUMC who desire a continued worship experience similar to their childhood experience are rigid in their nostalgic longing which in turn deters those who do not share in that nostalgia from experiencing God's ministry through their church. The limiting nature of such rigid reliance on the past is not only destructive for honoring the Great Commission through ministry, but also the individual member's experience of that ministry and experience of the presence of God. When Christians tend to compensate their lack of nostalgic fulfillment with an over idealized version of ministry that was "better" in the past, whether it is a lived past or glamorized version of another generation's past, the mission of the church becomes exclusive to a select few that share in that elusive vision of those grandiose former days.

Authors David M. Boan and Josh Ayers write that "When local churches fulfill their mission of serving as a window to God's kingdom, they bare demonstrating the most important features of a resilient community and impacting those around them in a way that creates a more resilient community."[66] Nostalgia is communal in nature. Shared experience and the way others

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[65] Manner.

[66] David M. Boan and Josh Ayers. Creating Shared Resilience: The Role of the Church in a Hopeful Future, (Carlisle, UK: Langham Publishing, 2020), p. 1.

who shared in those past experiences react to reminiscing about them influences our view of those past experiences.[67] However, we tend to gravitate toward people who foster the productive experiences that we can bring to today from our past. Therefore, if someone is "remembering" the past as a justification for condemnation of the present, they exert an influence on our memory retrieval process that is more likely to stimulate nostalgic response in a negative way. This perpetual reinforcement of destructive nostalgic reliance fosters church ministry that limits the mission of the church as a window to God's kingdom and demonstrating the features of a resilient community.

Community resilience is vital because it focuses on human agency as the main vehicle for change. Given the various crises, disasters and tragedies in churches and their communities experience it is essential that "socially connected stakeholders share vulnerabilities and capacities" in navigating such challenges, especially when determining the influence of past experiences in addressing stressors and its effectiveness in today's climate.[68] It is this function of the church as a means of impacting the community's resilience that was not only strongly endorsed by the religious "young adult" group from the BUMC/MUMC churches, but also those young adults who identified as spiritual but not religious.

<div align="center">Looking Back to Move Forward</div>

Research has shown that nostalgia is a highly social emotion that bolsters perceptions of connectedness with others and is a resource that facilitates help seeking by fostering social connectedness.[69] Nostalgia is an experience engrained in sociality and leads to identity

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[67] Huang, Huang, and Wyer Jr.
[68] Boan and Ayers., p. 10.
[69] Juhl, Wildschut, Sedikides, Xiong, & Zhou, p. 631.

continuity and productive group dynamics.[70] One of the healthiest forms of nostalgia throughout

human history "has always been to connect each generation to the next. In that sort of bond, you

pass down to the next generation, the best of the past."[71] The results of the BUMC/MUMC

participant's Nostalgia Inventory and Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey

indicate a desire to look back to a time that the church engaged in the community in a more

productive manner that fosters social resilience and personal connectiveness. This is even more

true among the young adult respondents who endorsed a nostalgic longing towards the past for a

better church community today.

Dr. Batcho recognizes that, "Just because we are oriented toward progress, doesn't mean

that there isn't something of value that we might have forgotten from the past." She describes

advances in technology and medicine that have built on past advances from previous generations.

Neglecting previous generational experiences to build upon creates a hollow ministry without the

depth of the past. The benefit of nostalgia in ministry is that it brings generations together in

building for a more effective and meaningful experience in worship and discipleship. James

Smith observes that "In our desire to embed the gospel content in forms that are attractional,

accessible, and not off-putting, we look around for contemporary cultural forms that are more

familiar."[72] Instead of asking contemporary "seekers and Christians to inhabit old, stodgy

medieval practices that are foreign and strange, we retool worship by adopting contemporary

practices that can be easily entered precisely because they are so familiar. Rather than the

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[70] Abeyta, Routledge & Juhl., p1029; Smeekes, Anouk, & Verkuyten, Maykel. (2015). The presence of the past: Identity continuity and group dynamics. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *26*(1), 163.
[71] Luna.
[72] Smith, James K.A. <u>You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit</u>. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), p. 75.

daunting, spooky ambience of the Gothic cathedral, we invite people to worship in the ethos of the coffee shop, the concert, or the mall."[73] However, this neglect of the past in order to attract the "young adult" neglects the evidence, including what is observed from this study, that generations, including young adults, experience a strong nostalgic longing for the past.[74]

Author and Anglican Bishop Todd Hunter encourages the rediscovery of ancient Christian practices a "repracticing." He presents that, "when I embarked on a search to find ways to make the habits of Christianity and church significant and valuable, I used the old as a launching pad for repracticed new."[75] Like Smith, Hunter argues that much of contemporary worship neglects the Christian's nostalgic longing for the past with a misunderstanding of society's fleeting interests in popular culture. This creates a "culturally trendy church" and emotionally manipulative experience void of the depth that Christians, as well as those who are spiritual but not religious, are desperately seeking.[76] Hunter offers that the "ancient church liturgies were designed to be used in everyday life. Their purpose was not just to organize worship services, but to shape lives."[77]

Congregation members' reliance on nostalgic experiences of their past worship experiences, or even a romanticized nostalgic vision of early Christian church practices, may be an indicator that they are not satisfied with their current experience and are trying to reshape their ministry location to satisfy their longing for the past. The impact of the communal experience aspect of nostalgic longing combined with the desire for more meaning or satisfaction

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Batcho, p. 142.
[75] Hunter, Todd. Giving Church Another Chance. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 32.
[76] Masci.
[77] Hunter, p. 32.

in the modern worship practices of the Christian church presents an environment that church

leadership could explore and build on in developing plans for ministry outreach and growth.

Moving Forward: A Suggested Approach

The results of the Nostalgia Inventory and Tenets of Christian Faith and Church

Satisfaction Survey suggest that church growth is productively impacted when leadership

engages the shared nostalgic longing of their parishioners in developing a ministry concerned

around adherence to the tenets of the Christian faith and community outreach. Additionally,

those people in our society that are spiritual but not religious who are seeking meaning to their

lives desire community involvement in their search for meaning. Churches that are grounded in

their understanding of the tenets of Christianity while engaging their role in the community, will

be more effective in providing those searching for spiritual meaning in their lives with

connections and a path forward in their journey.

When exploring and developing plans for church growth and outreach, church leadership

would benefit from approaching a discussion with parishioners with the focus on understanding

their satisfaction with their church environment and practices along with their degree of

communal nostalgia. For example, BUMC/MUMC parishioners who scored the lowest in

church satisfaction related to modern church practices were also the ones who scored the highest

on the Nostalgia Inventory items related to personal rather communal nostalgia. Leadership

should emphasize communal nostalgic remembrance of past experiences, such as "friends,"

"having someone to depend on," "the way society was," and "the way people were." Specific,

personal, nostalgic longing should be explored to find the communal aspect of such longing. For

example, the BUMC church staff who romanticized their personal nostalgic experiences of their

childhood in determining how children today should be engaged, would benefit from leadership encouraging them to emphasize the communal aspects of their past experiences rather than attempting to relive or reapply the specific actions that encouraged them in the past. Rejecting the reality of the culture of the day and its involvement in the lives of children is not a realistic approach to ministry and may be met with resistence. Emphasizing Christian fellowship that was enjoyed in the past as expressed within a modern context fosters engagement rather than resistance and resentment of the worship experience.

Engagement is a key component for church leadership in assessing church satisfaction when developing strategies for church growth and outreach. Including an assessment of nostalgia, such as Dr. Batcho's Nostalgia Inventory found at: https://www.cbsnews.com/ htdocs/pdf/Batcho_Nostalgia_Inventory.pdf, in church satisfaction assessments would offer an additional perspective on the relationship between nostalgic longing and a parishioner's satisfaction with their church's current ministry. These results will allow leadership to distinguish between nostalgic longing based on "personal" nostalgia as opposed "communal" nostalgia and develop a plan of action that emphasizes shared communal experiences.

An effective plan of action to address the distinction between "personal" and "communal" nostalgia and allow church leadership to incorporate shared nostalgic experiences with ministry and community outreach should include open multi-generational discussion and feedback. Multi-generational discussion groups that challenge "personal" nostalgic longings would allow productive fellowship across generations in building on former worship experiences from older members while recognizing the demands and cultural differences impacting younger members. Exploring common ground founded on the foundational tenets of Christian faith and

shared needs of parishioners would foster a healthy worship environment while promoting community outreach.

The results of the Nostalgia Inventory and Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey presents support to the suggestion that when church leadership approaches past experiences in a positive and communal way they may have a positive impact on each member's nostalgic longing for past worship experiences and foster church growth and outreach. Therefore, incorporating an appreciation of multi-generational parishioner's communal nostalgic longing in various church ministries, worship practices and outreach should be a component of church planning and development.

VI.   Conclusion

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." – *Romans 12:2*

Social influence today can impact our nostalgic longing for past experiences regardless of the context of those experiences. The results of the Nostalgia Inventory and Tenets of Christian Faith and Church Satisfaction Survey suggest that church growth is productively impacted when leadership engages the shared nostalgic longing of their parishioners in developing a ministry concerned around adherence to the tenets of the Christian faith and community outreach. As a result, a church congregation that approaches past experiences in a positive and communal way may have a greater positive impact on each member's nostalgic longing for past worship experiences and foster productive and healthy church growth and outreach.

Systematic Theology professor and author Simon Chan writes that "The church precedes creation in that it is what God has in view from all eternity and creation is the means by which God fulfills his eternal purpose in time. The church does not exist in order to fix a broken creation; rather, creation exists to realize the church."[78] Denominations and their churches have struggled as a result of pursuing the "fixing" of creation through chasing the perceived desires of youth or limiting their mission within the confines of destructive nostalgic recreation of past worship experiences rather than focusing on pursuing the realized church. They have lost sight that community as a whole is more personal and smaller than humanity's common perception of it. The worshipping community's activity is not to find its place in the "community" as much as it is for the community to find its place within the worshipping community. This realization is found in the acceptance and understanding that action rests in what the church "is" not in what the church "does," or "did" for them in the past.

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[78] Chan, Simon. <u>Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community</u>. (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006), p. 23.

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