

LED BY THE SPIRIT?  
DISCOVERING THE ETHOS OF CONGREGATIONS THAT REACH OUT

BY

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis which I am submitting to the University of Pretoria for the degree of PHILOSPHIAE DOCTOR is my own work and has not been submitted by me for a degree to any other tertiary institution.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables	iv
Summary	v
List of Key Terms	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Dedication	ix
 Chapter One	
Introduction	1
1.1 Principles, Strategy & Engagement	2
1.2 Problem Statement	9
1.3 The Research Hypothesis	10
1.4 Methodology	10
1.5 Limitations	14
1.6 Structure of the Thesis	15
1.7 Terminology	16
 Chapter Two	
Introduction	18
2.1 The Postmodern Community	19
2.2 Postmodernity, Spirituality, and the Spirit	37
2.3 Congregation as Hermeneutic	48
Summary	61
 Chapter Three	
Introduction	64
3.1 Location of the Study	64
3.1.1 Georgia	64
3.1.2 Atlanta	65
3.1.3 Economy and Demographics	65
3.2 Applying the Research	66
3.2.1 Geographic Boundaries	66
3.2.2 Church Identification	67
3.2.3 Congregational Surveys	71
3.2.4 Application	72
 Chapter Four	
Introduction	77
4.1 Church Backgrounds and Interviews	79
4.1.1 The Church That Stayed: Central Presbyterian	79
4.1.2 A Call to Community: Christian Fellowship	90
4.1.3 A Crisis of Community Identity: Druid Hills Baptist	105
4.1.4. Engaging Suburbia: East Cobb United Methodist	115

4.1.5 The Phoenix: Trinity Baptist	127
4.1.6 Congregation in Conflict: Norton Park Baptist	138
4.1.7 Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors: St. Mark United Methodist	148
4.1.8 Incognito: South Gwinnett Baptist	161
4.1.9 Almost There: St. Andrews Presbyterian	170
4.1.10 Introspective: Chestnut Grove Baptist	180
Chapter Five	
Introduction	191
5.1 Preliminary Survey Results	193
5.2 Primary Survey Results	194
5.3 Subjective Results	215
5.4 Conclusions	225
Appendix 1 Preliminary Survey (Church and Ministry Screening Survey)	231
Appendix 2 Primary Survey (Church and Ministry Involvement Questionnaire)	232
Appendix 3 Interview Questions	236
Appendix 4 University of Georgia Statistical Analysis of Church and Ministry Involvement Study	237
Bibliography	310
List of Tables	
Table	page
3.1 Ranked listing of churches responding to preliminary survey	74
3.2 Approximate locations of churches participating in the study	75
3.3 Survey distribution and return data	76
5.1 Questions associated with “core variables”	198
5.2 Summary of responses from holistic churches	202
5.3 Q. 10: Single main reason to remain involved with church	205

## SUMMARY

The present study developed from reports and observations that the Christian church in the postmodern West is in a condition of zero growth and even decline. Preliminary analysis of strategies proposed to address this situation suggests that they tend largely to focus on improving the implementation of traditional/institutional methodologies of church growth. While such strategies have their successes, the continuing decline in numbers of committed Christians highlight the urgent need to find additional approaches to the problem.

Recent research in the field of Congregational Studies (specifically, Sider, Olson & Unruh 2002, *Churches that make a Difference*) has shown that certain congregations are maintaining a high level of visibility in their immediate communities through a strategy of community engagement. Further, rather than such engagement being the result of the application of academically or institutionally derived programs, preliminary reports suggested that such community engagement has roots in a congregational “ethos of care” for the immediate secular community.

A connection was made between such “community-engaging” congregations and the congregation described by Lesslie Newbigin (1989) in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. In this book, Newbigin identifies a series of characteristics by which a congregation might be identified as being the “hermeneutic of the Gospel in society,” a situation, Newbigin maintains, only brought about by the centrality of Jesus in the life of the congregation. In broad terms these characteristics are the same as those determined by Sider, Olsen and Unruh as those of a “holistic” congregation.

The present study was motivated by the idea that identifying and studying such holistic congregations might give some insight to strategies that may be usefully employed by other congregations in expanding the Kingdom of God through community engagement; specifically, by developing a form of the ethos of hermeneutic or holism described by Newbigin and Olsen, Sider, & Unruh.

The research took two forms: an objective *survey*, developed in conjunction with the department of statistics at the University of Georgia, and subjective *interviews* conducted with the pastoral leadership and with individuals and focus groups within the participating churches. All the data from the Survey was compiled and analyzed by a graduate student in statistics at UGA under the strict guidance and supervision of a professor in the department of statistics, and the subsequent report was approved by that person.

The first three chapters of the thesis engage the necessary general description related to background and methodology, the nature of contemporary (postmodern) society and its historical development and the location of the research and the research strategy, respectively. Chapter four provides a *précis* of the interviews conducted with individuals and groups within the ten churches participating in the study. Finally, in chapter five are reported the results of the preliminary survey, used to identify “churches of interest” to the research; the primary survey, being the results of the objective surveys conducted within the participating churches; and the conclusions of the study. Appendices to the study include the Preliminary and Primary Survey instruments, the Interview Questionnaire and the final report from UGA, the “Statistical Analysis of Church and Ministry Involvement Study”

KEY TERMS

Atlanta

Christendom + post-Christendom

Community

Congregation

Congregation as hermeneutic

Congregational ethos

Congregational Studies

Enlightenment project

Hermeneutic

Holism + holistic ministry

Meaningful engagement

Outreach Ministry

Postmodernism

Spirit + Spirituality

Statistical Analysis

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*Lo! Some we loved, the loveliest and the best  
That Time and Fate of all their Vintage prest,  
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,  
And one by one crept silently to Rest. (Khayyam)*



DEDICATION

*For Nancy*