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 PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR is my own work and has not been submitted by me for a degree to any other tertiary institution.

Signature ______________________

Date: ______________________
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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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Many people have, in one way or another, left their mark on these pages. While my conscience tells me I would be remiss in my duty if I failed to recognize all of them, the reality is that there are more names than there is space to accommodate them. Without slight to all who have shaped my thinking, I am especially grateful to the late Paul Gaebelien, who told me always to “begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop!%;” Stan Wood, who initiated my interest in contemporary church/community studies and introduced me to the works of Lesslie Newbigin; Ron Johnson, who encouraged my research; and Malan Nel, my promoter at the University of Pretoria. In terms of the actual research work, I offer profound thanks to those congregations and individuals who gave freely of their time to participate in the study and to Will Abney, my wife’s graduate assistant at the McAfee School of Theology, who willingly allowed himself to be co-opted as data entry clerk.

I am also grateful to members of the University of Georgia Department of Statistics. Professor Jaxk Reeves provided assistance in developing the Congregation and Community survey instrument and professor Dan Hall and graduate student Michael Roca played an important and significant consulting and advisory role in the analysis and interpretation of the data generated by the instrument ensuring, to the extent possible, that the methodology of interpretation and analysis and the results and conclusions drawn from the investigation and provided as part of this research and contained herein as Appendix 4, conformed to generally accepted principles of statistical investigation. Any additional conclusions or inferences drawn from the research and contained in the body of the thesis, as well as any errors, are the responsibility of the author.

Special thanks go to my wife, Nancy, for supporting me – literally and metaphorically – in the time it took to complete the research and write this thesis. Nancy, my sons Calvin and Aaron and our pets – three miniature Dachshunds (Hobie, Zeno and Rusty), a “Dachsmutt” (Heracles) and Jonah, our ten-year-old iguana, were, in their own way, a welcome respite from the rigors of academia.

Finally I must note that the work on this thesis was, sadly, bracketed by two significant events; the death of my father, Captain Eric Gerald Walford (3/23/23 – 12/7/03) and my brother, Eric Andrew Walford (11/9/46 - ?7/19/05).

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)