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Planting Missional Mennonite Churches in Complex Social Contexts as the Denomination Undergoes a Paradigm Shift in Ecclesiology: a Multiple Case Study

David W. Boshart
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ABSTRACT

PLANTING MISSIONAL MENNONITE CHURCHES IN COMPLEX SOCIAL CONTEXTS AS THE DENOMINATION UNDERGOES A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ECCLESIOLOGY: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

David W. Boshart

Chair: Erich W. Baumgartner
ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University
School of Education

Title: PLANTING MISSIONAL MENNONITE CHURCHES IN COMPLEX SOCIAL CONTEXTS AS THE DENOMINATION UNDERGOES A PARADIGM SHIFT IN ECCLESIOLOGY: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

Name of researcher: David W. Boshart

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Date completed: February 2009

Problem

The problem investigated in this study is the struggle of church planters and their key stakeholders to develop common understanding about the churches that are being planted in complex social contexts while relating to a denomination in the midst of an ecclesial paradigm shift in mission.

Method

This qualitative research used a multiple case design with an emphasis on narrative inquiry. Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with denominational and conference leaders, church planters, and key stakeholders. The four cases chosen included Anglo, Hispanic, Hmong, and multi-ethnic church plants.
Findings

The study found that the attempt to establish a missional culture within Mennonite Church USA has been subverted by an underdeveloped change process. The study recommended a narratological approach to organizational culture development that involves generative learning and reflexive dialogue. This approach is consistent with the desired ecclesial paradigm and historic theological commitments.

Common theological commitments among the cases of church planting in this study included the authority of Scripture, the normative teachings of Jesus, believers’ baptism, community discernment in discipleship, justice, peacemaking, reconciliation of all things as a sign of God’s reign, simplicity in lifestyle, and an understanding of the church as different from, yet engaged with, society.

Significant aspects of a missional ecclesiology present in the cases included the classical view of missio Dei, contextual sensitivity, hospitality by welcoming the stranger, holistic and incarnational ministry, and a reaction to modern expressions of the church as the steward and purveyor of normative social values.

Prior assumptions that threaten to derail the development of a missional ecclesiology include seeing the church as a vendor of therapeutic services rather than an alternative society, the inability of Mennonites to allow themselves to be hosted by others, and the tendency to replicate ministries rather than envision reproducing, contextualized ministries. Hospitality was identified as a significant multi-dimensional issue in developing a missional ecclesiology.

Significant social and cultural pressures with which church planters contend included growing ambivalence toward organized religion, the marginalization of the
church in society, inhospitable immigration policies, language barriers, overwhelming social complexity, financial constraints, and the uncritical acculturation of Mennonites into mainstream American individualism.

Church planters understand their most significant contributions to be in the areas of congregation-based theological education and leadership development. An unexpected finding was the level to which church planters reflect on their practice. Creating opportunities for this level of reflection can provide important learning opportunities for increased competency.
Andrews University
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A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

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Member: Shirley Freed, Ph.D.

Member: Alan Kreider, Ph.D.

External: Wilbert Shenk, Ph.D.  Date approved
Dedicated to my wife, Shana,
who is my partner in all things;

And to those heroic leaders who
are the vanguard of the life to come,
who lead the church to dwell
where sin, brokenness, and alienation live
waiting in hope for redemption.
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I am grateful also to denominational and conference leaders who remain nameless in this document for the sake of confidentiality. They demonstrated true hospitality in welcoming my probing questions. This I take as their earnest, loving, and courageous desire for deepened understanding about the nature of the church, particularly at this point in the denomination’s early formation.

The church planters and those who assist them in developing new congregations opened their world in ways that have profoundly impacted my understanding of the church in mission. These heroic leaders are the most self-conscious vanguard of the reign of God I have ever encountered in the church. Working against all odds, they fearlessly press forward because, as one church planter has said, this work is “good.” In hearing their stories and struggles I alternately found myself moved to tears and prayer.
I am extremely grateful to the faculty of the Leadership Program at Andrews University who have so graciously guided my journey in the leadership program. Special thanks goes to Erich Baumgartner, my dissertation chair, and Shirley Freed, my methodologist. Erich’s consistent affirmation that a way would emerge through the mysteries waiting to be understood enabled me to continue in hope. His awareness and engagement with mission and leadership development provided the mentoring I needed to do this project at the nexus of theology, organizational development, and grassroots church planting. Shirley’s remarkable instincts in conceptualizing how to structure the data analysis was invaluable. Her encouragement to “get writing” was the springboard for progress. I count her a formative mentor in the art of qualitative research.

I am grateful to my good friend and mentor, Alan Kreider, for taking the time out of his own very busy and productive sabbatical to read early drafts of my dissertation that contained troubled concepts in need of significant refinement. Alan’s unflagging hospitality, love of the church, commitment to mission, and generosity in guiding the learning of persons like myself makes him, to my mind, “great in the kingdom!”

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This qualitative inquiry explored the process whereby church planters and their respective key stakeholders develop common understanding about the nature of the churches that are being planted in complex social contexts in one regional conference of Mennonite Church USA. This chapter begins with a story that illustrates some of the problems encountered by the various stakeholders in a developing church. The chapter will then provide a background to the problem. Given the background information, the problem of this study will be stated. This is followed by a statement of the purpose of this study, the research questions that guided the study, an overview of the research methods, and a summary of the conceptual framework for the study. The chapter will conclude by identifying basic assumptions, limitations, and conceptual definitions.

An Introductory Story

In the mid-1990s I was asked to co-mediate an entrenched conflict that had developed in a 10-year-old church plant. In the mid-1980s, a retiring pastor moved to the Midwest to be nearer to his adult children. Because he had limited means to support his retirement, he developed a proposal to the regional conference to plant a church in a small Midwestern city of 30,000 people with a depressed economy in which there was no Mennonite church. This city, located on the Mississippi River, once thrived on an industrial-era economy driven by the river, the railroad, and manufacturing. In the current
generation, the city was struggling to find ways of reviving its growth in the information age focusing on education, healthcare, and technology. Many of these endeavors had taken the city’s focus away from downtown and the river to outlying areas of the city that sprawled inland.

Upon accepting the retired pastor’s proposal, the conference purchased a large home on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River to serve as the pastor's residence and first meeting place for the church. The conference also agreed to provide a full subsidy for the pastor's salary with incremental declines in support over the next 5 years. Two couples from two different states relocated to become the nucleus for the new Mennonite church. In the 4th year, the church had become a worshiping body of 35 people, but the pastor suffered a severe heart attack and could no longer provide leadership for the group. The conference placed another gifted, retired pastor and renewed the salary subsidy, declining it over the next 5 years. The congregation grew to be a church of 45 people and then ebbed and flowed between 30 and 45 several times. By the 5th year when the salary subsidy was coming to an end, the pastor, now 72, felt he no longer had the energy to lead the church and moved back to his home community in the Southwest. The church dwindled to between 25 or 30 participants.

By this time the conference had invested over $200,000 in this project and the church was still not self-sustaining. Before providing more funding to this effort, conference leaders re-evaluated the situation and determined that a new kind of leadership was needed. While the two former pastors were competent, caring individuals, they served more as chaplains to the small group than as church planters who were leading with strategic initiative to grow a church. Because the core members of the
fledging church had been working together for more than 8 years, the conference encouraged them to develop a search committee to secure new leadership. The candidates whom the conference recommended to the search committee, however, were individuals deemed to be more gifted for church growth than pastoral care. The conference agreed to renew the 5-year salary subsidy yet again and to provide additional training to the new leader at a church planting "boot camp" when the new leader was hired. Unfortunately, the conference leaders and the core group of the church did not talk explicitly about what each entity was expecting from the new leader. The core members of the new church did not realize that the placement of this new leader with a strategic agenda for growth would result in a new leadership paradigm.

The new pastor was hired, relocated his family, and was coached by conference leaders and denominational mission staff to make church growth and securing a permanent meeting place his first priorities. Unaccustomed to this level of assertiveness from their leaders, the core group of the church began to feel controlled and disempowered. Within 2 years of the church planter’s arrival, accusations of dishonesty and abuses of power began to volley between the church planter and lay leaders. It wasn’t long until the core group and the new pastor were at an impasse. The church's corporate life ground to a halt. Conference leaders appointed two seasoned pastors from the area to mediate the conflict.

After several sessions of mediation, it was discovered that the conference leadership, the new pastor, and the congregational core group all had different expectations for the role of the new pastor. It was evident that all the stakeholders held understandings of what a “real” church would look like. These understandings included a
hope to have a building, a church council, a board of elders, and other traditional organizational structures that replicated other existing churches. These expectations were almost entirely tacit. While the core group, conference leaders, and new pastor agreed that growing the church was the goal, the core group was not emotionally prepared to embrace the new leadership paradigm. The two families in the congregational core group who had relocated to form the nucleus of this church were so invested in the future of the church that they were unwilling to share power with a leader who challenged their decisions.

As the mediation process proceeded, the pastor and core group became increasingly entrenched in their accusations of dishonesty and the abuse of power. The pastor-congregation relationship was terminated. While the congregation continued to meet for another 5 years, it never recovered a robust vision for church growth. The congregation carried a deep sense of pain for its perceived failure, and the congregation was unable to extend trust to succeeding leadership. The church closed in the fall of 2005.

**Background of the Problem**

Kotter (1990) has written, “The direction-setting aspect of leadership does not produce plans, it creates vision and strategies. . . . What’s crucial about a vision is not its originality but how well it serves the interest of important constituencies” (p. 36). The introductory story is an example of a vision that was neither original nor did it serve the interest of important constituencies. This story illustrates how a lack of common understanding at several levels of leadership can result in corporate self-destruction.
In 2001, two Mennonite denominations merged into one, creating Mennonite Church USA. Five years into the transformation process, the Executive Board of the new denomination offered a refined statement of the denomination’s purpose: “Joining in God’s activity in the world, WE [sic] develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures” (Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, 2006, para. 2).

While the church’s denominational leadership and intelligentsia are increasingly committed to a missional ecclesiology, many in the denomination have not experienced this core identity. Recent Executive Board action communicated this reality to the denominational constituency.

As the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, we speak with a single and unified voice declaring that our vision and call to engage in God’s purposes in the world is not adequately supported by our present relationships, behaviors and organization. (Houser, 2008, p. 22)

People involved in church leadership and church planting are caught in a chaotic environment of systemic change between the traditional Christendom models of mission and the new “missional” paradigm. They are further caught by attempting to plant churches in an increasingly post-Christendom context characterized by discontinuous change. According to Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006), “In a period of discontinuous change, leaders suddenly find that skills and capacities in which they were trained are of little use in addressing a new situation and a new environment” (p. 9).

In the past 20 years, the regional Midwestern conference Mennonite Church USA, in focus for this study, invested between $1.5 and 2 million in support of developing churches in communities and among ethnic groups where there currently are no constituent churches. As a traditionally rural denomination, the paradigm for church
planting to urban areas has been largely a matter of collecting the “sons and daughters of Menno lost to the city” than doing evangelism.

The working paradigm for church planting in Mennonite Church USA in the last half of the 20th century has been influenced by mainline and other Protestant models. In these models the conference provides full-time financial support for a church planter for the first 2 years. In subsequent years the subsidy from the conference declines incrementally until no subsidy is provided by the 5th year. The clear hope of the conference is that within 5 years the church planter and a collected core group will have grown to become a self-supporting congregation. In spite of investing nearly $2 million in the 20 years prior to 2005, no self-supporting congregations had emerged as a result of the conference’s church-planting strategy. After 20 years, it became clear to conference leaders that it was past time to stop attempting the same strategy, hoping for different results. Without a coherent ecclesiology, visions originate and develop in seemingly random ways that result in a diffused organizational culture, structure, process, and strategy (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1999). When these elements are not aligned with a coherent conceptual framework, the future of the developing church is in peril from the outset.

In 2005, the regional conference of Mennonite Church USA in focus for this study declared a moratorium on significant financial subsidies to church planters. The conference has since channeled its funding toward the infrastructure needed to develop a more strategic approach to church planting that reflects a missional ecclesiology. Missional theology, as an ecclesiology, is a recent theoretical genre whose roots can be traced back to the first third of the 20th century. Missional theology has only begun to be
identified as a distinct theological paradigm in the past two decades. Little has been written on the development of a vision for missional ecclesiology from a social science research perspective. Most books and articles written by church planters are intended to provide anecdotal stories of “success.” This empirical study contributes to a much needed conceptual knowledge base with regard to the development of processes that lead to common understanding of the nature of churches being planted in complex social contexts from a missional perspective.

In 2005, the conference in focus for this study asked me to accept a volunteer staff role as conference mission strategist to conduct research to deepen the understanding of the process by which church planters and their respective stakeholders come to a common understanding of their task. As the introductory story illustrates, how these understandings are shared by the partners involved is a fundamental issue for which we need better understanding, skill, capacities, and practices. It is self-evident that church planting is intended to bring joyful witness into the world, not self-destructing pain. This research intended to create greater understanding of the processes that result in a joyful and coherent witness to the reign of God.

**Statement of the Problem**

Church planters and their key stakeholders are planting churches at a time when the denominational mission paradigm is undergoing systemic change. There are tensions between the traditional “church with a mission” model and the new “missionsal church” paradigm. At the same time church planters are attempting to begin new churches in a complex social context of discontinuous change. The problem in focus for this study is that church planters and their key stakeholders struggle to develop common
understanding about the churches that are being planted in complex social contexts while relating to a denomination in the midst of an ecclesial paradigm shift.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe the processes whereby church planters and their respective key stakeholders develop a common understanding about the nature of the churches that are being planted in complex social contexts while relating to a denomination in the midst of an ecclesial paradigm shift.

**Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. In what ways do the relationships, behaviors, and organization of Mennonite Church USA support or fail to support the development of “missional congregations” within Mennonite Church USA and one Midwestern regional conference?

2. What common theological commitments are present in the churches being planted in one regional Midwestern conference of Mennonite Church USA, and how are these developing churches aligned with a missional ecclesiology?

3. With what contextual pressures do church planters and their key stakeholders contend in the process of planting churches?

4. How do church planters understand their primary contributions to developing the churches they are planting?

**Methodology**

This research used a multiple case design with an emphasis on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This dissertation attempts to “describe and explain the
world as those in the world experience it” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205). Processes of developing common understanding and the “nature” of churches being planted were explored through narrative inquiry in four case studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Case studies allow for the investigation of “multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection, involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2006, p. 73). From an organizational theory perspective, the methodology of this study reflected the symbolic-interpretive approach to culture research. In this theory, “researchers steep themselves in the experiences and meanings of specific members of a culture,” in which,

the native view is not one native’s view, but a delicate amalgamation that represents the whole culture in its full complexity. To gain this perspective culture researchers describe the ways in which the expression and interpretations that they have collected fit together to form cultural patterns. (Hatch, 1997, pp. 218-9)

The cases in this study concentrated “attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). Data collection for this inquiry involved conducting semi-structured interviews with denominational and conference leaders, church planters, and key stakeholders. The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection. Four church-planting cases were purposefully selected to maximize ethnic and demographic diversity. The interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions that allowed the participants to tell the story of the process whereby they develop common understandings about the nature of the church being planted in its context. The constant comparative method was used to code data into emergent themes. Triangulation, member checks, rich/thick description, and peer review were used to ensure internal validity.
Case selection for this project was a matter of purposive and convenience sampling. The cases consist of all the developing churches within a Midwestern regional conference at the time the research began. The four cases were chosen because they represent different ethnic qualities: Anglo, Hispanic, Hmong, and an attempt to plant a multi-ethnic church. The cases represented a diversity of context. One case is located in a rural setting, one is located in a small town setting, and two are located in a major urban metropolis. Ethnic and contextual diversity across the cases added significant richness to this exploration.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is based on a specific theological concept called missional ecclesiology. As such, the conceptual framework anticipates the exploration of missional theology as a post-enlightenment ecclesial paradigm. A missional ecclesiology emphasizes that mission originates in the character and purposes of God rather than originating in the imagination of the church or specific leaders. The “sent” nature of the church is emphasized. Rather than being sent in order to build the church, the church is sent to give itself to a world in desperate need of reconciliation waiting in hope for redemption.

Missional theology calls for a high degree of contextual sensitivity and organizational culture. “For the Christian worker involved in either local church or mission work, issues of organizational culture should be investigated for implications in the life of their organizations” (Finzel, 1989, p. 67). The emphasis on contextualization and organizational culture in missional theology begs the questions, “How do those involved in planting a church function together and how do they develop common
understanding about the nature of the churches being planted in complex social contexts while at the same time relating to a denomination undergoing systemic change?"

**Significance of the Study**

Little has been written on the process whereby church planters and their key stakeholders develop common understanding of the nature of the churches that are being planted. Most books and articles are written by church planters who have experienced some measure of “success” (Cole, 2005; Warren, 1995). These authors do not intend to offer their stories as models for replication; however, replication does seem to be the default mode for their consumers. Without a clear philosophical framework it is difficult for church planters and their key stakeholders, as with any organization, to develop common understanding for their task, and that results in a confused strategy (Kotter, 1990; Tushman, Newman, & Romanelli, 1986).

Other literature on church growth, evangelism, and church planting is entirely theological rather than empirical in nature (Shenk & Stutzman, 1988). Theological arguments are important to shaping the life of the church and testing direction. When a theological framework is present without empirical research, it is difficult to conceptualize the models for implementing the framework that inform common understanding.

This study attempted to demonstrate that church planting, as a function of the church in mission, is best served by a commonly held theology, a clear ecclesiology, a competent understanding of organizational culture, and learning through observation of the interplay of these three. Recently a limited body of literature has begun to emerge that synthesizes a theoretical missional framework with empirical data (Barrett, 2004;
Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006; Stetzer, 2006; Van Gelder, 2005). Still, very little literature focuses on the cooperative processes at work in the relationship between church planters and their key stakeholders as they work to develop common understanding about the nature of the churches that are being planted in complex social contexts while relating to a larger denominational system. The current study contributes to a gap in the literature that speaks to the synthesis of a conceptual framework with the process of developing common understanding among church planters and their key stakeholders about the nature of the churches they are planting in complex social contexts while the denomination is undergoing a systemic paradigm shift in mission.

**Basic Assumptions**

It is important for the reader to understand the researcher’s worldview. Since the phenomenon under study occurs within the context of the church, I assumed the significance of the Christian Scriptures as the church’s primary source for developing basic assumptions. This research was conducted within the frame of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It relies on truth revealed in story. As Harry Huebner (2005) writes, “What we say to one another on the way is the medium through which the world becomes the world to us” (p. 1). Related to this assumption is the conviction that the particulars found in narrative inquiry “exemplify more than they describe directly. In the particular is located a general theme” (Eisner, 1998, p. 39).

This study assumes that church planting is a positive endeavor. There are many motives for church expansion—some honorable, some deplorable, and infinite gradations between (Murray, 2000). This study assumed that church planting, rightly motivated, is a worthwhile task.
Finally, I approached this task with a number of biases. I am a leader in the Mennonite Church, a denomination that traces its roots to the 16th-century Anabaptist movement. The core beliefs of the Mennonite Church in Anabaptist perspective emphasize discipleship in the way of Jesus, the authority of Scripture as discerned within the gathered community, and peacemaking. I want and expect the church to be a creative organism that seeks new and vital expressions. I believe in the church. I believe that the church functions with a specific set of cosmological assumptions that differs from secular institutions. Though variations of worldview abound within the broader Christian church, I believe that the church has a basic and unique understanding of what is really real.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimitied to four cases. This study was delimitied to the relationship between church planters and their key stakeholders and not other kinds of relationships that might be involved.

**Limitations**

This study may have been limited by the fact that the cases being explored did not all originate at the same time. The study may have been limited due to the varying degrees of development in the relationships between the church planters and their respective key stakeholders at the time the data were collected.

**Definitions**

A number of terms need to be defined at the outset of this study. These terms are defined perhaps more specifically for the purposes of this study than they may be defined in the general literature.
Anabaptism: The Anabaptist movement began in the early 16th century as a radical reform movement that challenged the established church’s alignment with the State, the practice of infant baptism, and the exclusive authority of the church’s hierarchy to rightly interpret Scripture. In contrast, Anabaptists practiced believers’ baptism, rejected violence, practiced discipleship in the way of Jesus, and emphasized communal discernment guided by the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture.

Contemporary convictions have been articulated for the global Anabaptist community which includes a number of Mennonite denominations. Anabaptists affirm a Trinitarian understanding of God who seeks to restore a fallen humanity by calling people to fellowship, worship, service, and witness. Through the voluntary believer’s baptism, Anabaptists embrace the life and teachings of Jesus as normative for Christian discipleship. The praxis and worldview of the church are shaped by reading the Bible in community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in light of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Empowered by the Spirit of Jesus, Anabaptists renounce all forms of coercive power including violence, taking seriously the call of Jesus to love their enemies and work for justice for all. Anabaptists seeks to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, striving to offer a holistic witness to God’s grace through service, caring for creation and inviting all people to new life in Jesus (Mennonite World Conference, 2006).

Christendom: Christendom generally refers to the historic period beginning when the church and state became co-extensive during the rules of Constantine and Theodosius. Christendom is more specifically defined in different ways depending on whether emphasis is on the church or the state. For Stone (2007), Christendom refers to
the conflation of the church and the state in “which the two are fused together for the sake of governance in such a way that Christianity becomes a project of the state or an appendage to the state, subject to its violent ends” (p. 118). Kreider (2007) defines Christendom as “a culture seeking to subject all areas of human experience to the Lordship of Christ” (pp. 91-2). Christendom in this understanding is characterized by common belief, common belonging, common behavior and coercion.

**Church Plant:** Church plant is the label given to a church that is under development in a new location. Church planting is the commonly understood term for beginning new churches. A working definition of church planting for the purposes of this project would be: “The activity of an individual, a group or the whole of an existing body of Christians aimed at establishing a new identifiable group” (Hopkins, quoted in Timmis, 2000, p. 15).

**Church Planter:** A church planter is the lead individual in the development of a new church. This designation is widely accepted as a class of church workers with a unique skill set that overlaps with general pastoral skills but includes specialization in the areas of evangelism, organizational development, and mission.

**Discontinuous Change:** “Continuous change develops out of what has gone before and therefore can be expected, anticipated, and managed. . . . Discontinuous change is disruptive and unanticipated, it creates situations that challenge our assumptions” (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006, p. 7).

**Key Stakeholders:** Most church planters develop new congregations in consultation or accountability with an ecclesial structure. These structures include parachurch organizations, denominations, middle judicatories, and informal partnerships.
of congregations and/or individuals who provide some combination of oversight, support, and strategic discernment. For the purposes of this project the key stakeholders include a reference council, a ministry advisory committee, participants in the life of a fledgling congregation, and selected conference and denominational leaders.

**Mennonite Church USA:** The Mennonite Church is “the thickest real-life embodiment of Anabaptist ideals and convictions” (Grimsrud, n.d., para. 3). Mennonite Church USA is a denomination born in 2001 through the merger of two historic Mennonite denominations. Missional theology/ecclesiology is the denomination’s leading foundational commitment. The denomination’s purpose statement says, “Joining in God’s activity in the world, we develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures” (Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, 2006).

**Missional Theology/Ecclesiology:** Ecclesiology is a sub-discipline in theology. It is the study of the nature of the church. In the early stages of its development, the missional paradigm was referred to in the literature as a theology. It is increasingly applied to ecclesiology, the study of the nature of the church. Sometimes missional is simply applied as a modifier for the word church. A good and simple definition of missional church is articulated by James Love (2005): Missional churches move “from mission as just a component of their life, to the whole of a church's life becoming mission led by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.” Missional ecclesiology is described in detail in the literature review.

**Regional Conference:** Mennonite Church USA has 21 regional conferences that exist for credentialing leaders, helping congregations in a regional area participate in
mission that is beyond the capacity of individual congregations, and to develop common theological understanding for faith and practice in the regional context.

**Summary**

Chapter 1 presented a picture of the current state of church planting within one regional Midwestern conference of Mennonite Church USA. By their own admission the denominational leaders agree that the vision and call of the church to develop and nurture missional congregations of many cultures has not been adequately supported by the current relationships, behaviors, and organization. Church planters and their key stakeholders are planting churches at a time when the denominational mission paradigm is undergoing systemic change. At the same time, church planters are attempting to begin new churches in complex social contexts. This study describes the process whereby church planters and their key stakeholders develop common understanding for the nature of the churches being planted in complex social contexts while the denominational system is undergoing a shift in mission paradigm.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction
This study explored how church planters and their key stakeholders develop common understanding about the nature of the churches that are being planted in one regional conference of Mennonite Church USA as the denomination is undergoing a paradigm shift in mission. In the creation of the new denomination, Mennonite Church leaders, in 2001, proposed a frame-breaking change in the denomination’s self-understanding. The framers of the organizational culture and structure of the new denomination declared missional ecclesiology as the foundational commitment for Mennonite Church USA (Burkholder et al., 2001). As background to understanding the nature of the churches being planted, this review begins with a survey of literature that deals with organizational culture change with a special focus on the work of Schein (1985, 1996, 1997, 2003). This literature review then turns to the broadest issue in this problem, which is the understanding of the nature of the churches being planted. This literature review begins with a survey of recent literature in ecclesiology, that branch of theology concerned specifically with the nature of the church. Because the church’s history spans nearly 2,000 years, it is impossible to review everything that has been said about the nature of the church. Particular attention is given to the work of Dulles (2002) in developing models of the church.
This literature review of ecclesiology was limited to the most recent literature with special attention given to the nature of the church from a Western perspective. The review will then examine current literature on the more specific ecclesiology known as missional ecclesiology. A view of missional ecclesiology is proposed as an augmentation to Dulles’s (2002) classical models of the church. Next, this review considers the interface between a missional ecclesiology and Mennonite Church USA. Both denominational and conference leaders hope that missional ecclesiology will become the formative ecclesiology not only for new churches but also for the denomination as a whole. After looking at the literature on organizational culture change and ecclesiology, this review provides an overview of the literature related to the constituent parts of the problem. These parts include church planting as an activity of the church, the qualities and characteristics of church planters, and the nature of the relationship between church planters and their key stakeholders. The literature review concludes by reviewing the literature on corporate discernment and dialogue as foundational aspects of organizational learning.

**Organizational Culture and Change**

Developing common understanding about the nature of churches being planted informed by a missional ecclesiology involves the development of an organizational culture. Affecting change in organizational culture is a complex issue. According to Kotter (1990), “interdependence is a key characteristic of modern organizations” (p. 49). He suggests that because of this interdependence, the change process in organizations poses a special challenge to leaders, for unless those involved in the organization “line up and move together in the same direction, people will tend to fall all over one another” (p.
49). This “falling over one another” is an apt description of the denominational system and the state of church planting in Mennonite Church USA today (Kanagy, 2008).

Getting people to line up and move in the same direction when trying to create a systemic change in an organization begins, as Schein (1985) suggests, with culture development. Schein (1985) suggests that “the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture and that the unique talent of leadership is their ability to work with culture” (p. 2). Schein’s definition of culture includes “a pattern of basic assumptions” (p. 9). By basic assumptions he is speaking about the patterns of assumptions out of which rise the espoused values and the artifacts and creations manifest in the social and physical environment of an organization (pp. 14-16).

According to Schein, a culture develops as a response to the organization’s attempt to survive through external adaptation and internal integration (chapter 2). Schein believes that in order to understand an organization’s culture, one needs to discern a group’s underlying assumptions “and to identify the paradigm by which the members of a group think about, feel about, and judge situations and relationships” (p. 111). Schein’s list of assumptions that give rise to an organization’s cultural paradigm is ontological in nature (the nature of reality, the nature of humanity, humanity’s relationship to nature, the nature of human activity, and the nature of human relationships) (p. 86). These basic assumptions are similar to the essential questions that James Sire (2004) posits as the foundation for the development of a worldview. While worldview is often an individual’s understanding of the nature of reality, organizational culture emerges out of the convergence of all the worldviews represented among the members of an organization.
In later work, Schein (1997) anticipates that the contexts in which organizations exist increasingly reflect the complexities of postmodernity. He no longer speaks of one culture represented in an organization. Instead, he identifies three cultures within organization. Figuring out how to get these three cultures in true dialogue with each other is the key to organizational learning. Schein labels the three cultures of management in industrial organizations “the operator culture,” “the engineering culture,” and “the executive culture” (Schein, 1996). While Schein encourages the adaptation of these labels to the subcultures found in healthcare and education, it is useful to find labels for the representative sub-cultures within an organization that better reflect the specific discipline or industry under consideration.

Schein (1985) has indicated that religious, educational, social, and governmental organizations will conceptualize their core mission in different ways as their basic assumptions interact with their specific social context (p. 52). The subcultures present in the case of church planting in this study might be characterized as the denominational system (the executive culture), the conference, or middle judicatory leadership system (the interlocutor culture), the church-planting leaders, and key stakeholders (the incarnational culture). The executive function is self-evident as the work of creating and managing the culture of the whole. The interlocutor culture reflects the middle judicatory that interprets the culture to the grassroots but also can provide critical feedback to the executive culture that indicates the point to which the denominational culture is being embodied. The third culture is described as “incarnational” in that it is trying to embody the conceptual basic assumption articulated by the executive culture and interpreted and
tested by the interlocutor culture. The use of incarnation will also have meaning as missional ecclesiology is explored later in this review of literature.

At the bottom line, all of these subcultures may have differing perspectives on the task at hand informed by different centers of authority. Schein (1997) would suggest that the flow of understanding does not move simply from the executive culture through the interlocutor culture to the incarnational culture. Rather, Schein suggests, “To create alignment between these three cultures . . . is not a case of deciding which one has the right point of view, but of creating enough mutual understanding between them to evolve solutions that will be understood and implemented” (Schein, 1997, para. 45). In the current situation of Mennonite Church USA, as an organizational system, it is apparent that the three subcultures operating in the system have not, to this point, created enough mutual understanding among them “to evolve solutions that will be understood and implemented” (Schein, 1997, para. 45).

Understanding the cultures represented within an organization is one aspect of culture change, and it is largely a matter of internal integration. Another aspect of organizational change is the issue of external adaptation. Tushman et al. (1986) suggest that organizations will experience periods of decline in performance due to how the organization experiences changes in the external environment that require systemic change. Sometimes an organization becomes so out of touch with the external environment that small adjustments to the organizations are not adequate to restore organizational effectiveness. This is reflected in the decline of denominations in a context that increasingly reflects post-Christendom (Van Gelder, 2005).
Periods calling for this systemic change are referred to as reorientation, described as “a relatively short period of intense activity during which top-level leaders make major changes in the organization’s structure, strategy and climate” (Yukl, 2005, p. 358).

During periods of reorientation, leaders implement significant changes to respond to a changing environment that threatens the success of the organization. Hills and Collins (2000) conducted empirical research on a parallel evolutionary movement involving alternating processes of “business process reengineering” and “total quality management.” In this theory of organizational change, the change process is characterized by generative learning where organizations gain the ability “to create the results they truly desire” (Senge, 2006, p. 4). The goal is to establish total flexibility across the organization in terms of structure, leadership, and intra- and inter-organizational relationships. The formational document of Mennonite Church USA seemed to be reaching for this concept of total flexibility across the organization (Burkholder et al., 2001, p. 13).

Building on Senge’s (1994) theory of generative learning, Schein (n.d.) suggests that generative learning, though potentially transformative, is not a natural process. Deciding to expand the capacity of creating a new future does not make it happen. “Most generative learning involves questioning one's basic assumptions, and this is an inherently anxiety provoking process that will be resisted” (Schein, n.d., para. 4). In an unpublished paper, Schein (1996) described the four factors of systemic health in an organization that, in large part, will determine the organization’s capacity to learn:

1) a sense of identity, purpose, or mission; 2) a capacity on the part of the system to adapt and maintain itself in the face of internal and external changes; 3) a capacity to perceive and test reality; and 4) some degree of internal integration or alignment of the sub-systems that make up the total system. (Schein, 1996, p. 4)
More will be said on the topic of organizational learning later in this review.

It is evident in recent statements by the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA that the denomination as a complex system is in the midst of a paradigm shift in the basic assumptions about mission. This shift in basic assumption is an attempt to adapt in the face of internal and external changes. The denomination, by admission of the Executive Board, does not believe it has the necessary degree of internal alignment of the sub-systems necessary to realize its mission (Houser, 2008, p. 22).

Effective evolutionary change processes require leaders to consider carefully how the changes affect every level of the organization. Leaders need to lay the groundwork that will cultivate readiness on the part of the organization for transformative rather than merely adaptive changes (Schein, 1985, 1996). Interestingly, the group given the task of developing the organizational culture, strategy, and structure for the new denomination was called the “ Transformation Team” (Burkholder et al., 2001). What is apparent now is that naming a process using transformative terminology does not necessarily make it so. Laying the groundwork that prepares organizations for transformative change requires leaders to adequately anticipate layers of resistance and work to convert the energy fueling the resistance toward organizational transformation that will result in learning how to be effective in changing environments. Jick (1993) and Maurer (1996) believe that it is helpful to view resistance as “an energy that can be redirected to improve change” (as cited in Yukl, 2005, p. 286).

Tushman, Newman, and Romanelli (1986) suggest that periods of successful reorientation will be followed by longer periods of convergence (Yukl, 2005, p. 360).
During convergence, senior leaders make “adjustments” in policy, role clarification, reallocation of staff and financial resources, and other changes necessary to implement the paradigmatic model reflected in the broader strategic plan. The focus during convergence is solidifying and reinforcing the strategy resulting from reorientation.

Reorientation and convergence processes can be a double-edged sword. Periods of reorientation can result in organization renewal, vitality, and environmental responsiveness. Reorientation can also result in a reckless strategy that results in inter-departmental division and turf battles. On the other hand, periods of convergence can provide new role clarity, enabling employees to carry out the new strategy more effectively. Convergence can enable senior leadership to hire the right people skilled to implement the needed changes. Convergence also poses the possibility of reinforcing “the internal forces of stability . . . making it harder for executives to make major changes” in the future (Yukl, 2005, p. 360). It is, perhaps, a testimony to the perceived effectiveness and stability of the institutions of the former denominations that has resulted in the resistance to the present changes necessary to realize the missional future of the new denomination.

In 1996, Tushman and O’Reilly augmented punctuated equilibrium theory by calling organizations to become “ambidextrous.” In this rendition, the theory is expanded to include not only evolutionary change but also revolutionary or “frame-breaking change.” In their theory of ambidextrous organizations, reorientation and convergence remain sequential; but leaders need to pay attention to both at the same time, anticipating periods of reorientation well in advance of downturn in performance. Successful leadership brings increasing alignment among strategy, structure, culture, and process.
while at the same time preparing for the inevitable revolutions required by discontinuous environmental change.

One wonders if the two former denominations that merged to create Mennonite Church USA adequately assessed the paradigms under which each former denomination was functioning and what kinds of frame-breaking changes the new paradigm would require. It is possible that the lack of systemic health in two key areas has contributed to an arrested change process of Mennonite Church USA that has resulted in a 6-year period marked by growing uncertainty and instability. These areas would include (a) the lack of capacity to perceive and test reality and, (b) the lack of capacity to adapt and maintain itself in the face of internal and external changes (Schein, 1996).

Bolman and Deal (1997) offer a paradigm of four frames through which leaders and members can view their organizations. The four frames are Structural, Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. Most organizations will normally identify with one or two of the frames. Looking at the organization through a lens that is less familiar can be an important key for leaders in determining how resistance to change might be overcome, what new strategic avenues might be explored, and how the leader’s own self-understanding might be broadened.

Viewing organizations and leaders through alternative frames helps to identify key blind spots. Leaders, for example, have their preferred frames through which to evaluate an organization’s performance. When a leader is willing to shift the frame through which he or she is viewing the organization, new possibilities come into focus. If leaders prefer to view the organization through the structural or political frame, in times of reorientation it can be important for the leaders to view the organization through the
symbolic frame and begin to talk about the future in terms of a story that captures the imagination of the organization. Such an attempt was made in the Kanagy (2007) profile of Mennonite Church USA in which the demographic picture of Mennonite Church USA was described with parallel, metaphoric pictures that recalled the story of Israel’s developing history from homeland to fall and exile.

This theory offers the possibility that organizational effectiveness, growth, and success do not need to be limited by the traits, giftedness, and skill set of the leader. This seems like a helpful corrective to the seduction of charismatic leadership as defined by Shamir, House, and Arthur (Yukl, 2005, p. 252). Though leaders have preferred ways of being and may not be able to become all things to all people, Bolman and Deal (1997) offer four ways for leaders to view their organizations that are not bounded by traits, skill set, or giftedness alone. This theory places the organization in a subjective rather than an objective position. With the organization viewed as a subject, leadership can stand outside the organization, walk around it, and consider how the organization looks from the vantage point of each frame. Leadership itself can be considered subjectively. The leadership team or oversight board can view the organization from multiple and less familiar frames to consider how the preferred leadership frame is limiting or releasing the organization’s fuller potential. Competency in viewing organizations through alternating or multiple frames could likely contribute to building greater systemic health in the four areas outlined by Schein (1996).

Getting closer to the ecclesial field and building on research akin to that cited above, Herrington, Bonem, and Furr (2000) developed a guide for leading change in congregations. This approach to leading change is an attempt to align with a missional
ecclesiology by focusing on a set of key questions: What is God doing in this context? What unique gifts and opportunities does this congregation have? How can leaders develop the greatest possible alignment between opportunity, structure, people, and processes? In the issue of alignment we see parallels to the alignment called for in Tushman’s (1999) ambidextrous organizations (alignment of culture, strategy, structure, and process). Herrington et al. (2000) propose a strategy of innovation that involves the development of a leadership team made up of people outside the formal structure.

Though this process is decidedly leader-centered, a key element in leading change is the creation of a vision community. A vision community “is a diverse group of key members who become a committed and trusted community in order to discern and implement God’s vision for the congregation” (Herrington et al., 2000, p. 41). The vision community is to be an informal structure. The members are not elected nor do they have terms. They are, in fact, to function from the beginning of the process to the end.

In one of the former denominations such a vision community, called the Faith, Life and Strategy Committee, was a longstanding prophetic voice in the denomination. In contrast, the design team for the creation of Mennonite Church USA was made up of leaders who held high-level executive offices in the former denominations, and therefore had invested stakes in the new organization. Interestingly, it is not apparent in the organizational structure of Mennonite Church USA today where the work of vision is lodged. It is possible that in light of the recent declaration of the denomination’s Executive Board, an ad hoc vision community of people outside the formal structure could help the system become more supportive of the missional future that the denomination is seeking to embody.
Ecclesiology

The heart of the issue in this study is the nature of missional churches of many cultures that the denomination seeks to develop. Ecclesiology deals with the basic assumptions about the nature of the church in its historical context. The emphases in any ecclesiology have given rise to every identifiable tradition, denomination, division, and sect in Christian history. With a history of almost 2,000 years, the nature of the church has been framed in countless ways.

Ecclesiology has been described from various disciplinary perspectives. For example, broad ecclesiologies are written from the perspective of missiology and theology (Bosch, 1991), history (Kreider, 2005), and organizational development (Brodd, 2005). Others frame ecclesiology in terms of church tradition, that is, church as sacrament and sign (Lumen Gentium, 1964). “Free Church” thinkers cast ecclesiology in terms of voluntary communion (Freeman, 2004). Still others frame ecclesiology in metaphoric Trinitarian terms where the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relationship is paralleled in the nature of the church (Newbigin, 1963). As is evident it is impossible to talk about one ecclesiology, for the church has many.

Neil Ormerod (2002) has aptly said, “Of all the theologies, ecclesiology must be the most practical” (p. 10). It would not be possible to do an adequate review of ecclesiology in general, nor would it be within the scope of this study. Common understanding about the nature of churches being planted in a contemporary North American context is the focus of this study. As an empirical study, this study assumes a social science methodology. The nature of the church, as a historical organization, cannot be understood apart from its historical context. While theological foundations of a
missional ecclesiology will need to be understood in order to carry out this study, the study will be most concerned with ecclesiology in situ.

Avery Dulles (2002) has attempted to make the study of ecclesiology manageable by providing a taxonomy of ecclesiologies described in empirical terms. Dulles uses three questions to structure his “models” of the church: What are the bonds of union? Who are the beneficiaries of the church? and, “What is the goal of the church? Using these three questions, Dulles identifies five models of church: church as institution, church as mystical communion, church as sacrament, church as herald, and church as servant. These models are summarized in Table 1. This review will later return to these models as outlined by Dulles (2002) as these same questions are applied to missional ecclesiology.

The Effect of Post-Christendom on Ecclesiology

Post-Christendom first appears in the literature in a 1965 article by Paul Peachey, “New Ethical Possibility” (Randall, 2007). In this article, Peachey rejects the commonly used ‘post-Christian’ label to describe Western society. Peachey suggested that ‘post-Christian’ indicates the “passing of the ‘Christian religion’ as such, which would be an obvious fallacy” since the Christian faith precedes the rise of Christendom (Peachey, 1965). Christendom describes a 1,500-year period beginning with Constantine’s Edict of Milan, A.D. 313. By the end of the fourth century under the reign of Theodosius, the church and society became “co-extensive.” In his correction of David Bosch’s benchmark work on the mission of the church, Kreider (2005) developed his argument for dividing church history into three epochs: pre-Christendom, Christendom, and post-Christendom.

Kreider (2005) characterizes the pre-Christendom church as a largely illegal
Table 1

**Summary of Dulles’s Models of Church**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>The Bonds of Union</th>
<th>The Church’s Beneficiaries</th>
<th>Goal of the Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church as Institution</td>
<td>The members of the church are unified through the approved doctrines, communicate in the legitimate sacraments, by subjecting themselves to the duly appointed pastors. The Church’s membership is visible.</td>
<td>The members of the church</td>
<td>To give her members eternal life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Mystical Communion</td>
<td>The members are bound to one another through the reconciling grace of Christ. The Church’s membership may be invisible.</td>
<td>The members of the church</td>
<td>To lead humans into communion with the divine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Sacrament</td>
<td>The social and visible signs of the grace of Christ operant in believing Christians binds the church together.</td>
<td>Those who are able to better articulate and live their faith thanks to their contact with the believing and loving church</td>
<td>To purify and intensify human response to the grace of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Herald</td>
<td>The union of the church is found in the fact that all are responding to one and the same Gospel.</td>
<td>Those who hear the word of God and put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior</td>
<td>To herald the message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Servant</td>
<td>Union of the church is found in the mutual brotherhood that springs up among those who join in Christian service in the world.</td>
<td>Those who benefit from the church are not primarily the members of the church but brothers and sisters around the world who draw a word of comfort or obtain respectful hearing, or receive material help</td>
<td>To help all people wherever they are, to keep hope alive for the kingdom of God and its values. In this way the church promotes the mutual reconciliation of all people and initiates them in various ways into the kingdom of God.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
religious group that existed on the margins of society. The church grew through attraction. Membership was voluntary and often involved risk (p. 62). Constantine’s Edict of Milan, A.D. 313, legalizing Christianity and the determination of Theodosius I in 380 that Christianity would become the official religion of the empire transformed the nature of the church “from being perceived as a threat to the security of the empire into a guardian of the status quo” (Shenk, 2005, p. 74). This shift in the church’s self-understanding defined its ecclesiology for the next 1,500 years (Barrett, 2006; Guder, 1998, Kreider, 2005; Murray, 2004; Randall, 2007; Shehadi, 2005; Shenk, 2005; Walls, 1996). Notable movements such as the Donatists, Waldensians, Lollards, and the Anabaptists were exceptional traditions within normative Christendom (Randall, 2007). These movements existed as marginal, deviant movements reflective of the pre-Christendom church.

From the beginning of Christendom, the state and the church became united in making Christianity compulsory for the citizenry of the nation. Beginning with the Protestant reformation of the 16th century, the survival of Christendom received its first serious challenge. While contesting some of the medieval church’s practices, the Protestant reformation retained the hope that church and state would be co-extensive (Shenk, 2005). When the lines of the church are demarked by the lines of the nation, the nature of the church and mission is formed accordingly.

The first paradigm is labeled, “Church without a mission.” In this paradigm the church believed that mission was largely a “function of the state.” The church did not think about sending missionaries to evangelize the world beyond the boundaries of the state. Instead, whenever the state expanded its boundaries, the church moved into that area and announced her claim on the region as under the reign of Christ.

The second paradigm, “mission without a church,” reflects the revival movements that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries apart from the institutionalized mainline churches. These movements have been referred to as “sodalities,” a term popularized by Ralph Winter referring to “mission societies that were created by like-minded entrepreneurs focusing on one or two mission issues” (Pierson, 2006, p. 299).

The third paradigm, “The church in mission,” refers to the current era beginning in the second half of the 20th century in which the disciplines of ecclesiology and missiology began to take each other seriously. This last paradigm is illustrative of Emil Brunner’s (1931) oft-quoted statement insisting that mission for the church is indicative rather than imperative: “The church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning” (p. 108). More than 40 years ago John Howard Yoder (1966) warned regarding what becomes of the church when it loses track of the centrality of mission to its sense of being:

A human community which is not constantly both experiencing and proclaiming the transformation of the human situation by the coming of God among men will immediately degenerate into Judaism or paganism; into defensive moralism or the superstitious practice of “religion.” (p. 31)

Reflecting on the shift between the “mission without a church” paradigm to the “church in mission” paradigm, Barrett (2008) offers this interesting reflection on sodalities and Anabaptist ecclesiology:
The Anabaptist movement did not begin as a sodality, to use the term
anachronistically. It saw itself as the church, not as an arm of the church. In fact,
most Anabaptist leaders emphatically rejected the idea that the magisterial
reformers and the Roman Catholics were the church at all. The witness of the
Anabaptist movement was completely integral to the Anabaptist congregation
(Gemeinde; they did not use the German word for church, Kirche, to refer to
themselves). They had no mission agency, and they were not the mission agency
of other reformers. (Barrett, 2008, para. 1)

It is interesting to think about how the organizational culture, structures, and
strategy of Mennonite Church USA might have been shaped if more clarity had been
given to this historical perspective on Anabaptist ecclesiology as a post-Christendom
age emerges.

The foundations of Christendom began to crumble in the late 19th century. The
convergence of many factors contributed to this collapse. A series of historic movements
set the stage for the end of Christendom. Beginning with the Renaissance, next to the
Reformation down through the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution and the
possibility of national autonomy all posed mounting challenges to Christendom’s self-
preserving powers (Peachey, 1965).

Today, a number of trends and anti-trends observable in Western societies have
been juxtaposed as a way of describing the emerging post-Christendom context
(Hempelmann, 2003). These trends and anti-trends create paradoxical points of tension
within which to understand the end of Christendom. These trends and anti-trends include
(a) globalization and nationalism, (b) secularization and new religiosity, (c) privatized
religion and an increasingly religious secular life, (d) individualism and new community
movements, (e) religious relativism and the desire for simplicity, and (f) clearness and
truth (pp. 45-6). The possibilities of these divergent realities existing together at the same
time in the same society are a reflection that it is no longer possible to talk about an
expectation that the world is moving toward Christian normalization (Peachey, 1965). In the course of this study, the nature of the church existing in the crucible of these trends and anti-trends will be examined.

The trends and anti-trends of secularization and new religiosity; privatized religion and increasingly secularized life; and individualism and new community movements have had a dramatic effect on traditional meanings of church membership. Building on the work of Hiebert (1994), Murray (2004) described the need for a “centered-set” model of ecclesiology that speaks to the issues of belonging, believing, and behaving (pp. 26-38). In contrast to what Murray calls the “fuzzy-set” church characterized by 20th-century liberalism, Murray describes the distinctive features of the centered-set church, as I precisely quote here:

1. It has a definite center, comprising non-negotiable core convictions, rooted in the story which has shaped the community—and ultimately in Jesus Christ.
2. This center is the focal point, around which members of the community gather enthusiastically.
3. Its core convictions shape the church and separate it from other communities in a plural and contested culture.
4. The church expends its energy on maintaining the core rather than patrolling the boundaries.
5. Confidence in its core convictions frees the church to be inclusive, hospitable to others, who are welcome to explore the community.
6. Those who ‘belong’ are moving toward the center, however near or far away they currently are in terms of belief or behavior.
7. This is a dynamic rather than a static model, suitable for communities living towards a vision and missional churches that anticipate constant interaction with others. (Murray, 2004, pp. 29-30)

This description of the centered-set church provides a useful path for churches struggling to understand the nature of belonging at the nexus of the trends and anti-trends in a society that increasingly reflects post-Christendom. Whether the experience of post-Christendom in America is as acute as in Western Europe is debatable. Christianity
continues to be a prominent influence. American politicians are regularly welcomed into the pulpits of influential Christian churches. Christianity continues to be a strong influence in the shaping of American cultural values through mass media. Though acknowledging that Christendom for most Americans is past, Keifert (2007) writes, “While Christianity in North America has undergone several disestablishments in the last 200 years, it is hard to see the present culture devoid of Christian influence in its woof and warp” (p. 25). Christianity remains a strong influence in social and political organization. Few, however, would disagree that the church is moving to the margins of an increasingly multi-cultural society. Rather than lament this marginalization as though the church is losing ground, many today are embracing post-Christendom as a new opportunity for the church to recover its pre-Christendom identity of solidarity with the marginalized and an opportunity for new levels of creative initiative in mission (Barrett, 2006; Hall, 1995; Randall, 2007). Wickeri (2004) indicates that whether or not we are in a post-Christendom society, the church is being moved to the margins. In order for the church to meet the challenges of its current social context, churches need a kenosis (or self-emptying) of mission so that they can once again become part of a movement in society that shakes up institutions and calls them to renewal. Our structures need to be more pluriform and de-centralized. In the future, the church may have a lower visibility than it now has; it may, at times, become more “hidden” in social movements. This is part of the missio Dei. (p. 197)

The Rise of Missional Ecclesiology

Missional theology is a relatively new development in churchly conversations though it has been a developing paradigm for missiology and ecclesiology since the first third of the 20th century. It is perhaps not new at all, but a recapitulation of a pre-Christendom ecclesiology described by Kreider (2005), and/or the recovery of an
ecclesiology that re-emerged in movements such as the Donatists, Waldensians, Lollards, and Anabaptists (Randall, 2007). It is creating a great deal of ferment for inter-denominational conversation, church revitalization, and church planting. If missional ecclesiology provides a way to recover an authentic and historic Anabaptist ecclesiology, the relevance of missional ecclesiology to this study is more than apparent.

Central to missional theology is a commitment to contextualization in anticipation of Christendom’s demise. Andrew Walls (1996) speaks of two principles that are simultaneously at work when the Gospel is being introduced in any society. The first principle is the “indigenizing” principle. This principle suggests that “the Gospel is at home in every culture and every culture is at home with the Gospel” (Walls, 1996, p. 7). The other principle is the “pilgrim” principle which suggests that “the Gospel will also put us out of step with society” (Walls, 1996, p. 8). These principles represent a tension that is hard to maintain but also demonstrate a sharp contrast from the Christendom model of mission as social and cultural conquest.

The task of contextualization in post-Christendom poses a challenge to ways of doing mission for traditional denominations. Van Gelder (2005) chronicles the shifting roles that denominations have played since the Protestant Reformation. The question of identity and function of the church has been focused by recent decades of declining denominations (p. 30). Lebo (2001) provides an example within the context of the Brethren in Christ Church—a denomination closely related to Mennonite Church USA. The Brethren in Christ denomination finds itself wrestling with the tension of retaining the foundational values upon which the denomination was based while at the same time responding to a context that is asking for new forms. Lebo raises the question of
competing influences in historic denominations. Which factor will be the dominant influence and shaper of the church’s work: identity or mission? Missional theology would suggest that this question poses a false dichotomy: The identity of the church is mission. Nevertheless, the question describes well the crucible in which denominations function in a post-Christendom context. Many churches in the West have become institutionalized to the point that the preservation of the tradition, or institutional identity, competes in influence with the needs and opportunities presented by the mission context. Managing the tension of the indigenizing and pilgrim principles can offer an important corrective to the nature of churches and denominations reflecting a post-Christendom penchant for institutionalization.

The roots of missional theology are found in the work of Karl Barth’s presentations at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932 (McPhee, 2001). At this conference Barth changed the Enlightenment-era conversation from talking about mission as an activity of the church to mission as an activity of God (McPhee, 2001). In his benchmark missiology, Bosch (1991) believed that this way of speaking about mission resulted in a new theological paradigm “which broke radically with an Enlightenment approach to theology” (p. 390). Barth’s understanding of mission as an activity of God, was further developed by Karl Hartenstein (Bosch 1991). Several decades later at the International Missionary Conference at Willingen (1952), building on the foundational work of Barth and Hartenstein, the idea of missio Dei was described:

The . . . doctrine of missio Dei was articulated at this conference: The classical doctrine of the missio Dei as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.” (Bosch, 1991, p. 390)
Now mission was understood as *participation* in the sending of God rather than originating in the imagination of the church. The church’s mission has no life of its own.

“The genetic code of the missional church makes it missionary in its very essence” (Van Gelder, 2005, p. 33). In this new concept of mission, mission is not primarily an act of the church but “an attribute of God” (Bosch, 1991, p. 390). The nature of the church is no longer understood in imperial terms as a power seeking to normalize Christianity.

Borrowing from Lesslie Newbigin, to extend this paradigm, McPhee (2001) writes that God’s people are involved in mission not out of obligation but out of a new identity.

When Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8), he was not issuing a command but making a statement about the nature of his followers. Likewise the New Testament’s metaphors for believers—salt, light, fishers, stars, letters, ambassadors, good seed—are never made in the imperatives. They are always *indicative* [emphasis mine], attesting that mission is the natural activity of the church. (p. 10)

Perhaps no one has done more to articulate an accessible understanding of missional theology than Wilbert Shenk. Shenk (2000) articulated missional theology most succinctly within an Anabaptist framework in his pamphlet, *Ten Defining Themes in Anabaptist Mission Theology*:

1. Mission originates in God's mission to redeem the world.
2. Mission is essentially a messianic movement led by the Suffering Servant in the power of the Spirit.
3. Messiah's message is the gospel of peace.
4. The church is both the first fruits of this messianic movement in the world and the primary carrier and instrument of messianic purpose; as such the very nature of the church is missionary.
5. The missionary's task is to announce and witness to Messiah's reign.
6. The goal of mission is the establishment of the new order under Messiah's rule.
7. Mission strategy grows out of the nature of this messianic movement.
8. Mission requires deep penetration into the world—for the world, against the world.
9. Mission is an act of radical obedience and discipleship.
10. The present age is the missionary age or age of the Spirit—the time between Pentecost and Parousia. (themes quoted from pages 4-14).

In Shenk’s (2000) defining themes, we see the development of a missional theology that is built on the foundational work of Lesslie Newbigin’s (1963) Trinitarian missiology. Van Gelder (2005) reflects on this Trinitarian understanding,

The church lives between the times. It lives between the now and the not yet. The redemptive reign of God in Christ is already present, meaning that the power of God is fully manifested in the world through the gospel under the leading of the Holy Spirit. (p. 33)

Lois Barrett (2006) writes of the growing influence of missional ecclesiology in many denominations, particularly mainline Protestant denominations. Mainline Protestant, and, for that matter evangelical, groups are for the first time trying to understand what it means to be the church in a North American society where the church’s power is marginalized. Barrett celebrates this reality as a sure sign of the end of Constantinian Christendom. This she says liberates the church to pay closer attention to the church’s context and the needs of the world.

Freed of the need to make things come out “right” for the government or society or to feel at home in the culture, the missional church can live out its understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church can have a different worldview. It can become an alternative community. It is different from the world, not for the sake of being different, but because it is seeking to conform to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, rather than to conform to the surrounding culture. (Barrett, 2006, p. 181)

Echoing the developing missional paradigm grounded in the Trinity, Barrett concludes, “The witness of the missional church is always grounded in the gospel of Christ, initiated by God, and led by the Holy Spirit” (Barrett, 2006, p. 182).

from the character and purposes of God. The broad work of *missio Dei* should not be reduced to evangelism or church planting. Rather *missio Dei* calls forth a church characterized by the incarnation of Jesus. Churches that are planted need to not only proclaim the good news, but be good news or be a sign of the good news. All missionary churches should be *distinctive* and *engaged*. To gain a better handle on how *missio Dei* contrasts with an Enlightenment paradigm, see the summary comparing “missional church” to “church with a mission” in appendix A (Barrett, 2001).

Because of the frame-breaking, highly contextual, and incarnational nature of a missional ecclesiology, it is often not easy to predict how this ecclesiology will be fleshed out in terms of practices to be replicated in multiple contexts. Barrett (2004) believes that the best way to identify practices is through observation intent on distilling patterns—or indicators—of missional ecclesiology demonstrated by churches seeking to live out *missio Dei*. Her research demonstrates how case studies of missional churches provide what Flyvbjerg (2006) refers to as the “force of example,” in understanding the nature of a phenomenon (p. 228). In her empirical research, Barrett (2004) has identified 12 indicators of a missional church (see appendix B).

Returning to models of the church described from empirical observation and informed by classical ecclesiology brings us back to Dulles’s taxonomy. Posing the three questions of Dulles (2002) to churches formed by a missional ecclesiology, the resulting taxonomy could be augmented as shown in Table 2. Adding the missional church to this taxonomy, we see that the “church as servant” and the “missional church” have much in common. The missional church paradigm moves beyond the “Church as Servant” model that presumes that the world is moving toward Christian normalization (Peachey, 1965).
## Dulles’s Models of Church Compared With Missional Church Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>The Bonds of Union</th>
<th>The Church’s Beneficiaries</th>
<th>Goal of the Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church as Institution</td>
<td>The members of the church are unified through the approved doctrines, communicate in the legitimate sacraments, by subjecting themselves to the duly appointed pastors. The Church’s membership is visible.</td>
<td>The members of the church</td>
<td>To give her members eternal life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Mystical Communion</td>
<td>The members are bound to one another through the reconciling grace of Christ. The Church’s membership may be invisible.</td>
<td>The members of the church</td>
<td>To lead humans into communion with the divine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Sacrament</td>
<td>The social and visible signs of the grace of Christ operant in believing Christians bind the church together.</td>
<td>Those who are able to better articulate and live their faith thanks to their contact with the believing and loving church</td>
<td>To purify and intensify human response to the grace of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Herald</td>
<td>The union of the church is found in the fact that all are responding to one and the same Gospel.</td>
<td>Those who hear the word of God and put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior</td>
<td>To herald the message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as Servant</td>
<td>Union of the church is found in the mutual brotherhood that springs up among those who join in Christian service in the world.</td>
<td>Those who benefit from the church are not exclusively or primarily the members of the church but those brothers and sisters around the world who draw a word of comfort or encouragement, who obtain respectful hearing, or receive material help</td>
<td>To help all people wherever they are, to keep hope alive for the kingdom of God and its values. In this way the church promotes the mutual reconciliation of all people and initiates them in various ways into the kingdom of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church in Mission</td>
<td>The unity of the church is found in its identity as distinct from the world and commissioned to proclaim and be a sign of God’s reign in the world.</td>
<td>Those who benefit from the church are not primarily the members of the church but the people, systems, and all aspects of creation that are not yet reconciled to the reign of God.</td>
<td>To become a mobile community that lives at the places where sin, brokenness and alienation are waiting in hope for God’s redemption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The added dimension that the “missional church” model brings is a post-Christendom perspective on the church’s expectation to be normative in society.

The distinction between “church as servant” and “missional church” may not be apparent at first glance. Both of these models strongly emphasize engagement with the world, serving the broken and needy people and situations in the world. Nevertheless, an important difference exists that makes the “missional church” a distinct model. Contrasting the “missional church” to the others illuminates Dulles’s worldview of the church as co-extensive with society as opposed to the missional church’s worldview of the church as distinct from society in three ways. First, the bonds of union in the “missional church” are described as an identity that is located outside the world. In Dulles’s “church as servant” the bonds of union are described as an identity that springs from those in the church who want to do good.

Second, while the “church as servant” and the “church as herald” suggest that the beneficiaries of the church are those beyond the church, Dulles uses the language of “brothers and sisters” to refer to those within the church and those outside of the church. The beneficiaries of the “missional church” are people and all creation that remain broken and out of alignment with the reign of God waiting in hope for redemption. The “missional church” adds clarity to God as the agent of redemption and not the church itself.

Third, while the “church as servant” model uses the language of Christian service and reconciliation, the values of the church are cast in terms of what is expected to be normative for the world. The goal of the “church as servant” is to make things a bit better for those who are hurting. While helping people in need is a great virtue, the “missional
church” model differs in that the “missionsal church” does not offer Christian aid to make
the world a little bit better in order to win people into the kingdom. Rather than locating
the church as a fixed space to which “brothers and sisters” are called, the missional
church goes and lives in solidarity with the broken and alienated while awaiting God’s
redemption. The missional church itself takes up residence in the places where sin,
brokenness, and alienation dwell waiting in hope for redemption.

The missional church understands reconciliation to be affected by God, not
primarily the church. As Kreider, Kreider, and Widjaja (2005) have said, “After all, our
mission as Christians is not primarily to bring solutions to the world’s problems, but to
bring hope for redemption” (p. 79). The church takes up residence at the places yet to be
reconciled to God to proclaim and be a sign of the reign that God is bringing to bear on
all creation. The hope of the missional church’s witness is that upon seeing and hearing,
those not reconciled to God will seek that reconciliation that only God offers through
Jesus. This contrast demonstrates that a missional ecclesiology contributes a new
understanding to classical models of ecclesiology.

Missional Theology and Mennonite Church USA

A missional ecclesiology is the declared foundational theological frame for
Mennonite Church USA: “Joining in God’s activity in the world, WE [sic] develop and
nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures” (Mennonite Church USA
Executive Board, 2006, para. 2). There are several ways in which missional theology is
well-suited to Mennonite Church ecclesiology. First, Mennonites have historically
approached the Bible from a “Christo-centric” perspective, that is, Scripture is read and
interpreted through the lens of the Gospel. Church planting grounded in missio Dei does
not look to Acts and the Epistles to provide the roadmap for church-planting principles. The church instead seeks to incarnate the mission that originates in the character of God as revealed in Jesus (Murray, 2000).

Second, Mennonites have a 500-year history of life and witness from the margins. They maintain a deeply held conviction for the separation of church and state. If Barrett (2006) is right, then the church liberated from “the need to make things come out right for the government or society or to feel at home in culture” should provide a natural orientation for how Mennonites seek to plant new congregations. As cited earlier, a historic perspective on Anabaptist ecclesiology believed that “the witness of the Anabaptist movement was completely integral to the Anabaptist congregation” (Barrett, 2008, para. 1).

Third, Mennonites have historically maintained an identity as a martyr church and therefore have emphasized a radical obedience and discipleship that penetrates deeply into the world (Shenk, 2000). They maintain a strong identity as resident aliens (Hauerwas & Willimon, 1989) in a two-kingdom universe. Operating from the margins has been the modus operandi for the Mennonite tradition throughout its entire history (Randall, 2007).

A number of publications have been produced for the church in an attempt to form the new denomination toward a missional ecclesiology (Barrett, 2002; Pelky-Landes, 2005). However, at the point of the 6-year review, the Executive Board of the denomination acknowledged that the church had not yet realized a missional identity, “declaring that our vision and call to engage in God’s purposes in the world is not
adequately supported by our present relationships, behaviors and organization” (Houser, 2008, p. 22).

To become a missional church, “the organizational self-understanding of the denominational, organizational church is replaced by a missional self-understanding for the missional church” (Van Gelder, 2005, p. 31). It is not easy to effect ecclesiological change in a denominational organization whose basic assumptions have evolved over 450 years, influenced by the melting pot of ecclesiologies present in a North American context. This reality is important to developing an understanding of the process of church planting in Mennonite Church USA today.

**Church Planting**

Church planting has been defined by Kanagy (2008) as “initiatives to develop new congregations, fellowships, or house church/simple churches” (p. 3). This term is contested by some as less specific than labels such as “new church starts” or “emerging communities of faith” (p. 3). Nevertheless church planting remains a highly searchable keyword in the literature. While there is a great deal of literature written on the subject of church planting, much of what is written is not scholarly research. Almost none of the research literature in journals is peer-reviewed. In many cases, church-planting literature is generated by a practitioner who has experienced a measure of “success” and writes a book to describe his or her approach to new church development. This is sometimes done in preparation for, or as a result of, requests to offer instruction to other potential church planters and/or denominational or parachurch mission entities (see Cole, 2005, for example). Perhaps the lack of scholarly literature and journals in the field is due in part to the possibility that those drawn to the field of church planting tend to be entrepreneurial
in spirit, that is, they are perhaps more comfortable in the realm of “doing” and “building” rather than “reflecting” and “theorizing.”

In recent years, a few practitioner-researchers have begun to conduct empirical research in the area of church planting. Stetzer and Connor (2007), for example, have conducted empirical research that has identified four significant factors associated with church-plant survivability among church plants in the Southern Baptist Convention. These factors examine how closely

the church plant expectations meet the reality of the church planting experience, the extent to which church planters provide leadership development for new church members, the consistency with which a church planter meets with a group of church planting peers, and the development of a proactive stewardship development plan. (p. 14)

Much more research is needed to understand the experience of church planting in North America. In addition to large-scale survey research as done by Stetzer and Connor (2007) and Kanagy (2008), more case study research is needed to get at “the complexities and contradictions of real life” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 237). It is this kind of context-dependent research that moves the practitioner and researcher alike from novice to expert (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Contextual Issues

Contextual understanding is an important issue in the development of new churches. Much of church planting occurs in minority and immigrant cultures as established Christian churches attempt to bring a distinctive theological understanding of the gospel to these groups. Contextualizing these theological understandings is a complicated task. Hinojosa (2005) found that the three most important missiological needs for a Latin American sub-culture in the United States are church planting,
leadership development, and increased social ministries. Attention to whether the targeted context for the development of a new church is urban or rural is important. Nebel (2000) suggests that because of “rural rebound,” rural and small town communities ought to be considered strategic places for church development to meet the needs of the newly burgeoning populations in these areas. Nebel argues that the church planter’s strategies for developing new congregations must be contextualized to the unique sociology of rural communities and small towns. This concern for interpreting the context in which churches are being planted dovetails with the contextual nature of missional ecclesiology. Approaches to church planting informed by Christendom will assume the church itself is a cultural paradigm and will impose the culture of the church on the context in which the church is being planted. On the contrary, as we have seen in the development of a missional ecclesiology, the post-Christendom church understands itself to have an “essence” awaiting contextual incarnation.

**Strategy**

The greatest attention in the literature in the area of church planting has been done in the area of strategy. Much of this research focuses on answering the questions, “Why are church-planting entities not more effective in developing new congregations?” and, “How can church-planting entities become more effective in developing new congregations?” These questions in themselves point to an inherent disappointment with current outcomes. Douglas Howells (2004) suggests a number of reasons for the lack of effectiveness in the Christian Church’s (Disciples of Christ) church-planting work. Revealing a bias that church planting is largely an urban endeavor, Douglas Howells cites the lack of a major presence of established Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in
urban areas of the United States. King (2001) proposes a model for the development of multi-congregations within existing churches in order to multiply a church’s ministry with the intended effect of spinning off new churches. Kohlbry (1997) argues for the development of small groups as a strategy for increasing the effectiveness of church-planting initiatives.

Payne (2001) and Rainey (2005) conducted studies to test the effectiveness of several models of church planting. Payne conducted a comparison study to evaluate the influence of the work of Robert Logan and Roland Allen. After analyzing their work, Payne identified several areas of concern in need of further theoretical work including ecclesiology, pneumatology, strategy, and methodology. Rainey (2005) examined the effectiveness of church planting by looking at a variety of church-planting models employed, conversion growth rate, the rate of new church starts, and the various contexts in which churches are planted. The most striking finding was that church plants experience an inverted relationship between congregational size and conversion rate. In other words, the larger the church grows, the rate of conversion growth slows proportionately. This is an example of the kind of contradiction that case study approaches, due to the closeness of the researcher to the context, can illuminate. In a qualitative study, Turner (2000) examined the possibilities for using the Natural Church Development inventory, an inventory designed for assessing the health of existing congregations, as the foundational, philosophical, and structural paradigm for the development of new congregations. This qualitative study resulted in the development of a conceptual framework for starting churches based on the quantitative research of
Natural Church Development. This kind of research is an example of how narrative inquiry can bring deeper understanding to the issue of church-planting strategy.

As an ecclesiological, and therefore theological, pursuit, many students of church planting believe that the foundational paradigm for the field rests in Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of the New Testament that trace the development of the first-century church (Cole, 2005; Little, 2005). These theorists attempt to distill the early church’s principles and strategies in order to replicate them as the church-planting strategy. While examining the early church helps us understand how the church contextualized the Gospel in a pre-Christendom world, this orientation runs the risk of assuming that 21st-century contexts are equal to first-century contexts (Murray, 2000, p. 68). Murray argues instead that if the church is attempting to proclaim and be a sign of God’s reign, the Gospels rather than the Epistles should be the guiding foundational material. In short, the church should attempt to incarnate rather than replicate (pp. 42-46). Incarnational approaches to church development will seek to develop ministries that holistically reflect the work of Jesus. This understanding of an incarnational foundation for church-planting strategy is consistent with the commitments of a missional ecclesiology. The emerging church’s ministry in a missional framework will be focused on the evangelism, liberation, deliverance, and justice-making ministries in the model of Jesus.

Church Planters

Because church planting is often a leader-centered rather than a democratic initiative, the ecclesiological orientation, gifts, skills, and traits of the church planter will determine in large part how the strategy for church planting develops. Work has been done in recent years attempting to identify a standard skill set and personal traits for
church planters that are distinguished from the skill set of other types of church leaders. Jackson (2005) attempted to demonstrate the importance of self-leadership practices or skills in developing healthy congregations. Thompson (1995) conducted a study to determine important competencies and personal traits in successful church planters. In his study, Thompson found that assessors and church planters agreed that leadership, evangelism, preaching, philosophy of ministry and discipling were considered the most important skills. Conscientiousness, resiliency, flexibility, likableness, self-image, sensitivity, and dynamism were considered essential character traits for church planters. It should be noted that these skills and traits were identified by a panel of assessment center leaders and a panel of church planters as the most important. Thompson (1995) did not determine if, in fact, church planters with these skills and traits are successful in their task.

It is not only important to consider the personal traits and skill set of church planters but also to consider the unique role of those who develop new congregations. Buck (2003) looked at the relationship of pastoral tenure and congregational growth in new congregations. This study looked at the evolving role of founding pastors and how their roles need to change over the first 20 years of a church’s existence. During this passage of time the church moves from an emerging to an established paradigm. Buck’s finding suggests that church planters should not see themselves only as “starters.” Long-term pastorates in emerging congregations resulted in more growth. Davis (2002) found that alignment between the self-understanding of the church planter’s role and the congregation’s expectations for leadership was critical to healthy process.
An important issue in the church-planting literature is the practices for the ongoing leadership development of a church planter. Mentoring is believed to be an important practice in the development of effective church planters. Cowart (2002) showed that the subjects in his study viewed their mentoring relationships as key components of their preparation. Hinojosa (2005) found that theological reflection is a key mentoring practice in helping church planters and their supervisors respond both sensitively and strategically when working in multi-ethnic contexts. Turman (2001) found that a church planter’s ability to involve every member in the life and ministry of the new church contributed to high levels of member commitment. All of this points to a great deal of learning that must take place as one attempts to apply one’s ecclesiology in situ.

Church Planter and Key Stakeholder Relationships

A pervasive trend in the field of missiology and ecclesiology is the focus on the development of mission partnerships. A post-Christendom worldview has resulted in the erosion of the social power bases of mainline Protestant and evangelical churches in American and Western European societies, and this erosion has had definite implications for many mission efforts that exist as sodalities. It is no longer assumed that mission flows “only across salt water . . . mission is also to the dominant culture” (Barrett, 2006, p. 181). It also follows that mission will no longer flow from the “institutional church” to “the field.”

In response to an emerging missional theology and a growing post-denominational movement, ad hoc rather than programmatic partnerships for mission abound. Manuel (2001) did a study that grounded the idea of partnership in the Old
Testament where, true to a paradigm of missional theology, God initiates mission but carries out this mission in covenantal relationships, understood in terms of partnership. The idea of covenant relationship as a paradigm for mission partnership is significant. In his study of the nature of the mission partnership between the Evangelical Christian Missionary Union and the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Tiessen (2004) found that invitational partnership is based upon a joint venture, coming alongside coordination of efforts, cooperation as the goal, and a collaboration of working together. Tiessen’s description of the qualities of invitational partnerships demonstrates this shift from programmatic, agency-based partnerships to relational and invitational partnerships developed for contextual purposes.

In spite of this attention given to the importance of partnership in mission, a gap in the literature exists when focusing on the partnership between church planter and the key stakeholders. Key stakeholders consist of judicatories, mission agencies, and other supportive partners, as well as members of the fledgling church who serve as a point of reference and accountability for the church planter. There is a great deal of literature on church-planting teams but the literature refers primarily to these teams as the people who are doing the planting and expecting to be part of the new church (Cole, 2005; Emmert, 2000; Kohlbry, 1997; Logan, 1994; Shenk & Stutzman, 1988; Stetzer, 2006). Several times when the stakeholder function is framed in accountability terms it is clear that the author understands these groups to be more obstacle than support. Researchers cited above would indicate that the sources of resistance can often be found in the way key stakeholders and church planters differ in their perception of what an effective church planter does and the nature of the church that is being planted.
Church Planter Competency Development

Few studies have been done that reflect on the issue of how church planters are helped in developing the competency for church planting. Cowart (2002) found that the 16 church planters who had planted at least one reproducing church identified mentoring by an experienced church planter to be a key factor in the success of their work. In a case study with one pastor, Davis (2002) found that the assessment of an outside consulting firm enabled the pastor to become more authentic and effective in his leadership. Hernandez (2004) found that “church planting” in a diverse ethno/cultural context required that supervisors and church planters practice theological reflection to develop effective ways of working within the cultural/ethnic urban environment. Thompson (1995) found that both church planters and a panel of assessors were able to identify similar positive characteristics of church planters.

A number of parachurch organizations offer intensive training sessions promising to give church planters a head start on their work. Some of these include Acts 29, Church Multiplication Training Center, “boot camps” sponsored by the Vineyard denomination, etc. No empirical research can be found that reports the effectiveness of short-term training center programs. Of the research available on the way church planters develop understanding about their role and task, it seems that approaches focusing on theological reflection in context, in situ coaching, and mentoring offer promising approaches to building competency.

Common Understanding in Developing Congregations

A key issue in the field of church planting, and central to this study, is the way common understanding is developed about the nature of emerging congregations. Where
does common understanding originate when mission originates with God? Who is the bearer of vision in emerging congregations? How is the vision developed in a way that causes the stakeholders to move beyond compliance to commitment (Senge, 2006, pp. 202-6)? How do the three sub-cultures of the executive culture, the interlocutor culture, and the incarnational culture come to common understanding of what they are hoping to do? The answer to these questions might be found in a growing body of literature that speaks to the issues of organizational learning.

**Corporate Discernment**

As a relatively new frame for thinking about the nature of the church, discovering and embracing a missional ecclesiology requires a process that extends beyond the pronouncement of leaders. When the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA announced the underperformance of the denomination to realize a missional future, the board was signaling a need for the greater alignment within the organization. That the organization had been functioning for 6 years at the point of this announcement indicated the need for new levels of discernment and developing understanding among the parts of the church.

Developing a common vision for the church is an exercise of corporate discernment at whatever level of the church is being considered. This is no less the case for seeking common understanding among church planters and their key stakeholders with regard to the nature of the church that is being planted. Emmert (2000) assessed the effectiveness of a process where core group members together discerned early in the planning for a new church the mission, core values, vision, and goals of the new church. Consistent with the organizational culture research base, Emmert found that the process
of corporate discernment had a direct impact on the ownership, long-term orientation, community, synergy, and a sense of accomplishment. The process also resulted in moving the group beyond compliance to a high level of commitment characterized by loyalty and high creativity. This process confirms the work of Senge (2006): “You’re ‘committed’ when you are not only enrolled but feel fully responsible for making the vision happen” (p. 203). The process described by Emmert (2000) also resulted in a feeling of heightened competence on the part of the group’s leader.

It is unlikely that the idea of planting a church will be born in the minds of a number of people at the same time. Based on the illustrative introductory story, it would appear that how this vision emerges, is cultivated, and how it is held by the various stakeholders is a key issue in vitality and viability of emerging churches. Though visions emerge in unpredictable ways, a misaligned organizational system will be ill-prepared to receive the vision and foster its development. Herrington et al. (2000) outline a step-by-step process for translating vision into a strategic transformational process for existing and emerging congregations based on transformational leadership theories of Burns (1978), Kotter (1990), and Senge (1994). The development of a shared vision is central to the commitment level of partners involved in any endeavor. The purpose of this study raises the question of how similar processes may or may not be at work in the church planter-stakeholder group relationship.

Dialogue

Hatch (1997) calls into question the assumption that the point of leadership is to manage organizational culture which, in postmodern terms, is interpreted to mean “control.” Because postmodernity is a socially constructed world, “we cannot, as
individuals, choose a different reality and impose it on others, the others must participate
as well” (Hatch, 1997, p. 367). One option of social constructivist approaches to the
change and learning process is to create an open process that is “available to all via public
discourse” (Hatch, 1997, p. 367). If as postmoderns suggest, “organizations are
constructed from language,” then dialogue becomes the means by which reality is
created. As cited earlier, “what we say to one another on the way is how the world
becomes the world to us” (Huebner, 2005, p. 1). Dialogue enables members of a culture
to become “observers of their own thinking” (Senge, 2006, p. 242).

Because discernment of common understanding among church planters and key
stakeholders is a corporate exercise, communication will be the centerpiece of the
process. Schein (1997) asserts that communication across organizational cultures is
necessary for successful organizational development in postmodernity. His assessment of
the world from an industrial perspective parallels the global shifts and pluralism of post-
Christendom in the ecclesial perspective.

We must acknowledge that one of the main consequences of technological
complexity, globalism, and universal transparency is that some of the old
assumptions no longer work. . . . We will have to find ways of communicating
across cultural boundaries, first by establishing some communication that
stimulates mutual understanding rather than mutual blame. (Schein, 1997, para. 51)

Developing the discipline of dialogue as described by Senge (2006) for creating common
understanding rather than mutual blame aptly describes the problem of developing
common understanding among constituent sub-cultures. Schein (2003) is emphatic on the
essential role that dialogue plays in organizational development. “Dialogue thus becomes
a central element of any model of organizational transformation” (p. 27). What both
Schein (2003) and Senge (2006) are referring to as dialogue is something deeper and
more intentional than “discussion.” Schein (2003) suggests that when an organization finds itself in substantive conversation, the process passes through a point of deliberation where there is lack of understanding and disagreement. This process is illustrated in Figure 1. One evaluates the options for developing understanding. The choice to move to

![Figure 1. Schein’s model of dialogue. From “On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning,” by E. Schein, 2003, Reflections, 4(4), p. 32.](image-url)
discussion begins a process characterized by advocacy, competing, and convincing. This leads to dialectic where the participants explore oppositions. The process then moves to debate where the goal is to resolve the opposition by logic, beating the other down, and winning.

On the other hand, for conversation to move to dialogue requires a space for suspending the need for immediate resolution so that participants can listen, accept difference, and build mutual trust. This process then moves to substantive dialogue in which participants confront their own assumptions and the assumptions of the other. The participants are open about their feelings and they seek to build common ground. At its best this process leads to what Schein (2003) refers to as “metalogue,” which is characterized by “thinking and feeling as a whole group, building new assumptions and a new culture” (p. 32).

Senge (2006) offers consistent but simplified requirements for healthy dialogue: (a) all participants must “suspend” their assumptions, literally hold them “as if suspended before us”; (b) all participants must regard one another as colleagues; and (c) there must be a “facilitator” who “holds the context” of dialogue (Senge, 2006, p. 226). Taken together with Schein’s (1985) understanding about the role that basic assumptions play in the development of an organizational culture, the discipline of dialogue is critical to the process of developing common understanding for organizational culture. If the attempt to create a new organizational culture based on a missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA was arrested due to a lack of alignment, this understanding of dialogue could be an important contributor to new levels of alignment in basic assumption for the executive, interlocutor, and incarnational subcultures. In the same way, in developing a
common understanding for a missional ecclesiology for planting churches in complex social contexts, this type of substantive dialogue will be a necessary discipline for church planters and their key stakeholders. Developing common understanding through dialogue is essential to the process of organizational learning.

Organizations as Learning Communities

Theorists such as Wheatley (2001) and Hatch (1997) have begun to offer new ways of understanding professional learning that are more in touch with postmodern understandings. In this approach social systems are allowed to organize themselves as living systems rather than machines. Life organizes itself as it recognizes shared interests, a change in meaning, when the freedom to choose is honored, and when the system is connected more to itself (Wheatley, 2001). In a similar vein to the discussion of dialogue, Wheatley (2001) advocates for the need and power of deep conversation in developing understanding in organizations. This is clearly informed by the educational theories of progressivism, multiculturalism, and constructivism, which tend to be highly context sensitive.

Our notion of understanding integrates knowing, acting, and being. Understanding of practice, then, is enacted in and through practice. Such embodied understanding of professional practice constitutes an unfolding "professional way-of-being" (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006, p. 389). In other words, organizational leaders not only learn knowledge and skills, but these are renewed over time while becoming integrated into ways of being the leader in question (Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006, p. 388-9).
Because organizations do not generally function in the classroom, most organizational learning occurs in the context of practice. It is therefore largely self-directed. Merriam and Caffarella (2006) articulate the goals of self-directed learning:

1. to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning,
2. to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and
3. to promote emancipator learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning. (p. 290)

These goals share a number of points of intersection with educational theorists such as Kolb’s model of reflection-on-action, situated cognition, Heidegger’s understanding of unfolding circularity (Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006, p. 392), and Dall’Alba’s and Sandberg’s theory of understanding of, and in, practice (p. 403).

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) adds further contextual insight to Kolb, Heidegger, and Freire by locating constructivist education communally (pp. 94-106). Palmer calls for learning to happen in a subject-centered community of truth where there are no pristine objects of knowledge and no ultimate authorities. “In the community of truth . . . truth does not reside primarily in propositions and education is more than delivering propositions about objects to passive auditors” (p. 101). This understanding of self-directed learning in organizations fits well with the work of Bolman and Deal (1997) who recommend that organizational leaders develop the skill to view their organizations not objectively as though there is perfect structure or culture to be created. Rather, the goal is to build the capacity to view the organization subjectively by seeing it through multiple frames. The very act of “reframing” one’s view of an organization will result in new understanding about the organization.

Palmer (1998) argues for a counter-cultural approach to learning: “In the community of truth, knowing and teaching and learning look less like General Motors
and more like a town meeting, less like bureaucracy and more like bedlam‖ (p. 101). The method at the center of Palmer’s community of truth is anti-hierarchical where complex communication results in “sharing observations and interpretations, correcting and complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus the next” (p. 101). This approach is complementary to the understanding of dialogue described by Senge (2006) and Schein (2003).

Organizations may get by without becoming a learning community if all that is needed is adaptive change. In the attempt to adopt a missional ecclesiology, Mennonite Church USA is pursuing transformative change. As seen earlier in this review, Schein (1996) identifies the four factors that indicate systemic health:

1) a sense of identity, purpose, or mission; 2) a capacity on the part of the system to adapt and maintain itself in the face of internal and external changes; 3) a capacity to perceive and test reality; and 4) some degree of internal integration or alignment of the sub-systems that make up the total system. (Schein, 1996, p. 4)

These four factors are “the basics of a ‘capacity to learn’” (p. 4). The degree to which these factors are developed in an organization will in large part determine the organization’s ability to learn.

The attempt to create a new denomination based on a missional ecclesiology was intended to result in transformative change based on generative learning (Burkholder et al., 2001). The key learning model embedded in the formational documents of Mennonite Church USA intended to affect transformative change in the learning community. Unfortunately the learning community did not translate into an organizational reality.

As the ground begins to shift under denominations (Van Gelder, 2005), and if the complexity of current social contexts is characterized by discontinuous change.
(Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006), and if Schein (1997) is right that one of the “main consequences of technological complexity, globalism, and universal transparency is that some of the old assumptions no longer work,” then organizations of all sizes need to develop the capacity for generative learning that moves the organization beyond maintenance and creates the open space that can result in organizational transformation (Schein, 2003; Senge, 2006). If the denominational system, church planters, and their key stakeholders experience tension in the development of a common understanding for missional ecclesiology, it seems that more attention and research need to be given to the issues of corporate discernment, dialogue, and learning communities that create transformed organizational cultures aligned around basic assumptions.

**Summary**

In reviewing the literature, the constituent parts of the purpose of this study have been examined. First, because the commitment of Mennonite Church USA leaders to the development of a missional ecclesiology requires transformational change in mission paradigm, the literature on organizational culture and change theory was broadly surveyed with particular attention given to Schein’s theoretical framework. The review then turned to the broad topic of ecclesiology, surveying the recent literature. The focus was then narrowed to a deeper review of the recent literature on an evolving missional ecclesiology. Literature on the more specific topic of missional ecclesiology as the foundation for the vision and mission of Mennonite Church USA was surveyed. This survey explored recent literature on the nature of church planting, the role of church planters, and the nature of the relationship between church planters and their key stakeholders. A survey of the literature found that little research has been conducted on
this relationship. Finally, I considered material in the literature that might indicate how denominational structures, church planters, and their key stakeholders might develop the capacity for generative learning that can open the space in organizational culture for transformation.

The review of the literature focusing on the missional church starts with the thought that mission begins with God. To embrace a missional understanding of the church means that mission is not a program or department of the church; the church is, by nature, in mission. God’s mission is prior to, or more basic than, human initiative in the life activity of the church. Therefore the life activity of the church is discerned by finding the places in the world where sin, brokenness, and alienation dwell, waiting in hope for reconciliation. Though the origin of mission lies with God rather than the programs of the church, an organization that is not aligned with the basic assumptions of missio Dei will not be adequately prepared to support the parts of the church in becoming aligned with God’s mission. The alignment of the church’s organizational culture with missio Dei is critical in keeping denominational and conference leaders, church planters, and their key stakeholders from “falling all over one another” (Kotter, 1990, p. 49). According to the literature, the “only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (Schein, 1985, p. 2). The denominational system of Mennonite Church USA has yet to embody the new culture. The literature would suggest that systemic alignment developed through processes of generative learning is a worthy pursuit for the church that understands itself as sent to join in the work of God who is reconciling all creation to himself through Jesus Christ.
The denominational and conference structures are ambivalent about the roles they are to play as administrative bodies in a church that is struggling to view its work through a missional frame. This concern is not addressed well in administrative ways in the missional literature itself, which tends to stay on the theological idealistic side. The current literature available is not very helpful in fleshing out what denominational and conference leaders would focus on in affecting a new paradigm for mission. A parallel tension exists in the church-planting literature. There is significant literature that describes the theological and conceptual frame for church planting. There is little empirical literature on the organizational culture and structural practicalities for church planting in relation to denominational and conference systems.

This case approach helped to highlight the tension between the theological, conceptual issues and the administrative, strategic issues. This study examined the connecting points between theory and practice. There are bodies of literature on organizational culture and missional ecclesiology, and a growing body of empirical research on church planting. This study offers a unique contribution to the literature by describing the process of church planting from the nexus of organizational change theory, missional ecclesiology, and church-planting strategy.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In the regional conference of Mennonite Church USA in focus for this study, church planters and key stakeholders are attempting to plant churches at a time when the denominational ecclesiology is undergoing systemic change. At the same time, the contexts in which these churches are being planted are characterized by discontinuous change. The problem in focus for this study is that church planters and their supervisory groups are struggling to develop common understanding about the nature of the churches that are being planted in complex social contexts while the denomination is in the midst of systemic change in mission paradigm.

The research questions guiding this study include:

1. In what ways do the relationships, behaviors, and organization of Mennonite Church USA support or fail to support the development of “missional congregations” in Mennonite Church USA and one regional Midwestern conference?

2. What common theological commitments are present in the churches being planted in one regional conference of Mennonite Church USA, and how are these developing churches aligned with a missional ecclesiology?

3. With what contextual pressures do church planters and their key stakeholders contend in the process of planting churches?
4. How do church planters understand their primary contributions to developing the churches they are planting?

**Study Design**

This research used a multiple case design with an emphasis on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Case study provides a method for developing understanding about a process from the perspective of the key stakeholders. Case study is the chosen design because the purpose of this study was concerned with the “how” and “why” of the processes involved in developing common understanding among church planters and their supervisory groups (Merriam, 1998).

In choosing the case study as the research design, it is important to identify the overall intent of the study. This interpretive study sought to discover conceptual themes and categories that would contribute to a gap in the literature and little existing theory concerning the phenomenon of church planting, mission, and ecclesiastical organizational culture (Merriam, 1998). The case study method allows the researcher to seek understanding of a bounded system or systems over a period of time through multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2006). Four cases were chosen to maximize ethnic and demographic diversity. “The more cases included in a study, and the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be” (Merriam, 1998, p. 40).

The focus of narrative inquiry is to develop understanding of a phenomenon. This understanding emerges by inquiring into the meaning of a problem or issue as the participants experience it (Creswell, 2006). The intent of narrative inquiry is to “surface” this meaning through the collection of participant stories, observation of participants in
their natural settings, and by examining documents and other representational artifacts that express how the participants experience the phenomenon being explored (Crewswell, 2006). This “surfacing” involves a back and forth comparison between the collected data and emerging categories and themes until a descriptive “picture” of the experience begins to emerge.

An important characteristic of narrative inquiry is that the research method is emergent rather than “tightly prescribed” (Creswell, 2006, p. 39). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) characterize this emergent aspect of narrative inquiry in terms of research done in a three-dimensional space (p. 49). The researcher enters the situation and explores the phenomenon “inward, outward, backward and forward, and situated within place” (p. 49). This three-dimensional framework asks the researcher to consider the internal condition of participants (emotions, hopes, and moral dispositions) and the external conditions of the environment. Researchers also explore the participants’ temporal experience with the phenomenon: past, present, and future. Consistent with this method of research, this study used a symbolic interpretive method (Hatch, 1997). In this theory, “researchers steep themselves in the experiences and meanings of specific members of a culture,” in which the native view is not one native’s view, but a delicate amalgamation that represents the whole culture in its full complexity. To gain this perspective culture researchers describe the ways in which the expression and interpretations that they have collected fit together to form cultural patterns. (Hatch, 1997, pp. 218-9)

Finally, research conducting narrative inquiry considers the “concrete physical and topological boundaries of the inquiry space” (Creswell, 2006, p. 51). Narrative inquiry seeks to develop a holistic account of an experience by providing “multiple perspectives, identifying many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges” (p. 39).
The current research design reflects inquiry in the three-dimensional space. The constituent parts of the problem under study indicate the need to look inward to the church-planting experience. There is a need to look outward to the context in which the church is being planted and to the larger denominational system. This study also required looking backward and forward to understand the history of an evolving mission paradigm. The cases also provided the possibility of looking at the internal commitments, hopes, and concerns of church planters and the various stakeholders situated within place.

**Purposive Sample**

The four cases chosen constituted a purposive sample. The four cases explored in this study are all church plants with a formal relationship with one regional conference of Mennonite Church USA. The sample was purposive in that the cases represented a diversity of ethnic and rural/urban contexts. The cases involved a church plant among a Hmong population in a major metropolitan city, a Hispanic population in a small town, an Anglo population in a small city, and a multi-ethnic group in a major metropolitan city. The diversity of contexts and ethnicity provided information-rich cases (Merriam, 1998). Four cases provided the rich description necessary to explore the three research questions. This number of cases provided “ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis” (Creswell, 2006, p. 128).

**Data Collection**

Qualitative research involves collecting data from multiple sources. Creswell (2006) suggests that there are four basic types of sources: interviews, observation, documents, and audiovisual materials (p. 43). There are many other types of sources including email communication, photos, and other artifacts. In this project, data were
collected primarily through interviews, documents, retreat proceedings, field notes, and observations. I was the primary instrument of collecting the data.

Self as Researcher

In this qualitative study, I was the “instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7; see also, Eisner, 1998). This method of data collection and analysis allowed me to enter and interact with the context under investigation.

In 2005, I was asked to serve as a volunteer staff member for the regional conference in focus for this study as a consultant to the church-planting movement of the conference. In that capacity church planters and their stakeholders have invited me into their processes, motivated by a desire to grow in their understanding of the task at hand. Schein, citing Lewin (1952), suggests that it is only as one participates in the change process of an organization that one can truly understand it (Schein, 1985). As a researcher, I was invited into the process of developing common understanding by the church planters and key stakeholders in the process of developing new churches.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of the dilemmas facing qualitative researchers as they attempt to live on the edge, trying to maintain one’s balance, as one struggles to express one’s own voice in the midst of an inquiry designed to tell of the participants’ storied experiences and represent their voices, “all the while attempting to create a research text that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience’s voices” (p. 147). Attempting to maintain this balance is a matter of judgment. This opens the researcher to criticism, but the fear of criticism need not silence the voice of the researcher.

As a pastor, mission strategist, and member of the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, I stood in a unique position relative to the purpose of this study. My
professional work is at the nexus of an emerging ecclesiology at the congregational, church planting, conference, and denominational levels. My concern for the church and the church’s faithfulness and effectiveness inform my voice as I report this research. I am present in the research text as narrator, interviewer, and participant (Tierney, 1997, p. 27).

**Interviews**

The data collection for this inquiry included semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the church planters and key stakeholders. I also conducted interviews with select conference and denominational leaders who are the stewards of church-wide priorities. The interviews consisted of broad, open-ended questions that allowed the participants to tell the story of their struggle to develop common understanding of the nature of the developing church and its context.

**Church Planter and Key Stakeholders**

Church planters and key stakeholder of each case were invited to participate in a group interview for their respective case. Group interviews were conducted with the church planter and key stakeholders for each case. The group interviews were approximately 90 minutes in length. The questions were framed to “surface” the story of the group’s experience of developing common understanding about the nature of the churches they are planting.

Church planters and key stakeholders were asked questions designed to gain insight into where the vision for the church plant originated and how this group has experienced working together: “How would you describe your vision for this work? From
your vantage point, who is the bearer of the vision for this work? How do each of you contribute to the further development of this church? What has been the biggest surprise to you as you have worked together? What can you tell me about the nature of the church you are planting? What common theological commitments do you believe this group holds? What can you tell me about the context in which you are planting this church? What have been the biggest surprises to you as this work has developed? What does success look like in this work? How would you describe the nature of the missional church?”

Conference Leaders

Interviews were conducted with select conference and denominational leaders. The conference ministry staff were asked to give their observations about the overall work of the developing church plants within their conference. They were asked questions such as, “What observations do you make as you watch churches being planted in this conference? What common theological commitments are a part of the developing churches within our conference? What would you say are the greatest strengths present among those who are planting new churches in this conference? Where do you see them struggling? How would you characterize the contexts in which churches are being planted? How would you describe the nature of the missional church? If you were in charge of one of the church plants, what changes would you make?”

Denominational Leaders

A limited number of brief interviews were conducted with denominational leaders including the denominational executive staff, a presiding elected officer, and a staff
member of the denominational mission agency who relates closely with the area of church planting. These denominational leaders were asked questions seeking the perspective of national leaders on the implementation of a missional ecclesiology. They were asked, “How would you describe the nature of the missional church? How would you describe the state of church planting in the denomination today? If you were in charge of planting a new church, what would your core commitments be? What are the key contextual issues to which you would want to attend in starting a new church? Where do you see a missional ecclesiology operating in our denomination? What gets in the way of forming a missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA?”

Retreat Proceedings

At least once during the period of research, the church planters along with one or two key stakeholders for each case participated in a gathering for reflection on the task of church planting in the regional conference. Data were collected from the recorded findings generated through exercises designed to bring church planters and selected stakeholders together to build common understanding. In preparation for this gathering the participants were asked to read common literature. They were led in a process of describing the nature of their developing churches and contexts where they are being developed. Church planters and select key stakeholders were asked to describe, from the perspective of their own case, their experience in church planting in terms of vision, context, why they need to do this work, and significant issues with which they are currently wrestling. They were asked as a whole group, “Why is church planting important? What are the qualities of the context in which you are planting a church? What do you need most from your conference?” The participants in this gathering were
then led in an exercise to reflect on their responses and to state what of all the information shared seems most important.

**Documents**

Documents provide important insight to the context of research that may not be surfaced through interviews. Foundational documents from the denomination, conference, and fledgling churches provided a point of reference for comparing the participants’ narratives to the historical record. Data collection for this study included documents from conference meetings such as minutes, as well as those generated in local strategy meetings. Newsletter articles, web pages, and church planter reports were also examined.

**Field Notes**

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed to provide as complete a representation of the experience as possible. In addition, field notes were made during and following the interviews to capture both “wide angle” and “narrow angle” observations (Merriam, 1998). These observations were recorded to capture the nonverbal expression of individuals and interactions within the group. Field notes were also generated in the church planter retreat where church planters and select key stakeholders recorded ideas and impressions on newsprint.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using several methods. The content of interviews, field notes, and artifacts was analyzed for recurring patterns of meaning (Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative method was used to code the data into emergent categories.
Categorical aggregation was used to “look for a collection of instances [in the hope] that issue-relevant meanings [would] emerge” (Creswell, 2006, p. 162). These categories were then grouped into broader themes. For example, case interviews surfaced understandings such as “God’s mission precedes human initiative” and “the church as self-differentiated but engaged in the world.” After further analysis and comparing these categories with the literature, I determined that these categories could be gathered with a number of others under the broader theme of “positive missional reflection.” The narrative data from each case were then analyzed through categorical aggregation and direct interpretation. Direct interpretation seeks to draw meaning from single instances (Creswell, 2006). I also used phenomenological analysis strategies such as “imaginative variation” to seek possible meanings from different points of reference (Merriam, 1998).

After the interviews were transcribed, I followed a recursive process of coding and recoding the statements of participants, seeking common issues and themes. The coded data from each case were then compared through cross-case analysis, resulting in a constellation of themes and subthemes. These themes and subthemes that emerged in the interview transcripts were further refined by comparing them with foundational documents from the church plants where they existed, proceedings from a retreat, and salient research literature. These themes and subthemes were then considered in light of the research question and collapsed into four broad themes, each related to one of the research questions. Attention was also given to the inclusion of disconfirming data. This was particularly evident when differences in worldview due to ethnic/cultural background challenged some Western ways of framing the issues in this study. For example, from the review of the literature on church planting and missional ecclesiology it was anticipated
that a post-Christendom worldview would be prominent among the church plants. In fact, the data demonstrated that the ethnic/minority groups in this study were less likely to identify with a postmodern or post-Christendom worldview than Anglo groups in this study.

After writing up the data for each case, a working draft was submitted to selected participants in each case for corrections and further feedback, inviting any further observations. This information was incorporated into the data and submitted to the participants for a second review. In several cases, this process resulted in new insight and deeper understanding on the part of these participants about the work that they are doing.

**Validity and Reliability**

A number of strategies were used to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. I employed structural corroboration and consensual validation (Eisner, 1998). Eisner describes structural corroboration as finding recurrent behavior in a situation that indicates that our interpretations are not “aberrant or exceptional, but, rather characteristic of the situation” (p. 110). An important part of this process was the inclusion of contradictory interpretations in the findings.

This study also checked with the members of the cases and experts outside the cases to see if there was agreement on the interpretation describing the process being examined. This process involved checking one’s interpretation with other people who are competent in the field of research to see if the others agree that the “description, interpretation, evaluation, and thematics of a situation [were] right” (Eisner, 1998, p. 112). This study also included member checks throughout the process of data collection.
and writing to see if the interpretations of the data seemed plausible to those who supplied the data in the first place (Merriam, 1998).

The reliability of this study was enhanced through the use of several mechanisms. The interpretation of the cases involved triangulation through multiple methods of data collection within each case description. The four cases also provide multiple sources for triangulating the data. The interpretive themes from the interviews were cross-checked with documents generated by the cases to see if they support the interpretation or not. I also related themes that emerged from one case with the themes that emerged with the other cases to check for concurrence and/or dissonance.

The data analysis was written in such a way that it would be evident to the reader how the data were collected and how the interpretation of categories and themes was determined. I have retained an audit trail of coded transcripts, artifacts and documents, and email communication to enable readers to “authenticate” the findings of the study if they desire to do so (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, cited in Merriam, 1998).

**Generalizability**

Where the purpose of quantitative research is the development of causal relationships and discovering of laws that explain phenomena, the purpose of qualitative research is to “describe and explain the world as those in the world experience it” (Merriam, 1998, p. 205). A qualitative understanding of generalizability is found in “multiple constructions of reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 212). Generalizability in this study is understood by seeing data in several ways. In the course of analyzing the data, concrete universals were discovered where the general lies in the particular. This understanding of generalizability is confirmed in our tendency to continually return to great works of art.
and literature for understanding (Eisner, 1998; Merriam, 1998). The research found naturalistic generalization, which is understood as research that guides but is not intended to predict. Finally, generalizability in this study is determined by the reader’s ability to ask what in this study is applicable to his or her situation (Merriam, 1998). This case study approach assumed that “formal generalization is over-valued as a source of scientific development, whereas ‘the force of example’ is underestimated” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 228).

This study was guided by a number of methods that enhance generalizability. The cases and findings were described through rich, thick description so that the reader is able to “see” the situation. The data have been reported in a way that allows the reader to consider how closely the situation described resembles another situation. The use of four case studies chosen for their ethnic and contextual diversity also increased the likelihood that the findings are generalizable to similar cases studied in similar ways (Merriam, 1998).

**Ethics**

Qualitative research requires careful attention to ethical dilemmas throughout the research process. It is not a matter of stating the ethical issues at the front end of a study and deciding that the ethical dilemmas have been resolved. It is in the very nature of qualitative research that ethical dilemmas can and will emerge throughout the process, requiring the researcher to be sensitive to the well-being of the subjects as well as prepared to make decisions about how the ethical dilemmas will be resolved (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In order to address the responsibility of the researcher to act ethically, this study was submitted to the Andrews University Institutional Review Board in order
to receive ethical approval for this research. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (a copy of the letter is found in appendix D).

Because I have been contracted from a clinical orientation, the participants in this study anticipated a number of benefits for themselves. At the most basic level, the findings of this study provided church planters and their respective stakeholders a deeper understanding of the other members with whom they are working. This study provided opportunities for deeper reflection, leading to greater insight and understanding among participants that is guiding their work in a more informed way. The research generated by this study provided important insight to conference and denominational leaders who are stewards of the church’s ecclesiology. The participants received a copy of the findings of this project as an outside interpretation of how church planters and key stakeholders are working to generate a deeper level of common understanding for their work.

The subjects of this interview included church planters, key stakeholders, and conference and denominational leaders. All subjects were over 21 years of age and had full capacity to give informed consent. The subjects were invited to voluntary participation in the interview processes. The identity of the subjects in this study will not be disclosed in any published document. A copy of the informed consent form that all subjects signed prior to participation is attached (see appendix C). Each participant received a copy of this form for their records. I will retain a signed copy of this form for a period of 3 years.

Summary

The focus of this study was to describe the processes whereby church planters and key stakeholders develop common understanding about the nature of the churches that
are being planted in complex social contexts while the denominational system is undergoing a shift in mission paradigm. This study used a multiple case design with an emphasis on narrative inquiry. This narrative inquiry examined four cases within one Midwestern regional conference of Mennonite Church USA. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews that were compared to other sources of data, including records, minutes, reports, and retreat proceedings. Validity was enhanced through structural corroboration, consensual validation, member checks, triangulation of sources and across cases. Generalizability was fostered through rich, thick description of the cases, data drawn from multiple sites, and cases chosen specifically because they represent demographic diversity.

This study sought to understand how the world becomes the world to the members of these cases. Deepening our understanding of how these groups of people develop common understanding of the nature of the churches they are planting resulted in a story that can be elevated for examination by others doing similar work. The story of these cases can offer guidance to others who are walking the same path.
CHAPTER IV

DENOMINATIONAL AND CONFERENCE LEADERS

Introduction

In 2006, Mennonite Church USA adopted a refined statement of the denomination’s purpose: “Joining in God’s activity in the world, WE [sic] develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures” (Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, 2006, para. 2). While this purpose remains the defining priority of Mennonite Church USA, many in the denomination have not experienced this reality. An action of the denomination’s Executive Board in 2008 indicated that underperformance of the denominational system.

As the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, we speak with a single and unified voice declaring that our vision and call to engage in God’s purposes in the world is not adequately supported by our present relationships, behaviors and organization. (Houser, 2008, p. 22)

In an attempt to understand the current state of developing “missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures,” two interviews were conducted. The first interview was with denominational leaders and an officer elected by the delegate body. Additional denominational perspective was gained in conversations with a representative of the denominational mission agency. Another interview was conducted with conference ministry staff members from the regional conference in focus for this study. This conference is 1 of 21 middle judicatories that make up Mennonite Church USA. This is the conference that serves the geographic region that encompasses the four cases also in
focus for this study. The participants included the four conference ministry staff members and one elected officer who oversees developing and credentialing leaders within the conference. In these interviews, denominational and conference leaders described their perceptions of an emerging missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA and reflected on the state of church planting as an initiative of the denomination’s priority to develop missional congregations.

**Perspectives on a Developing Missional Ecclesiology in Mennonite Church USA**

Denominational and conference leaders described a developing missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA. While the conversation with conference leaders focused on more regional and therefore more concrete experiences, the interview with both groups surfaced three issues in the development of a missional ecclesiology. These three issues include a growing ability to describe a missional ecclesiology (positive missional reflection), examples of anti-missional thinking that threaten to derail the development of a missional ecclesiology, and examples of systemic organizational confusion about how to operationalize a missional ecclesiology throughout the denominational system.

**Positive Missional Reflection**

Denominational and conference leaders identified four possible ways a missional ecclesiology contributes to a clearer understanding of the mission of Mennonite Church USA. These include (a) attention to God’s preceding work in the world, (b) an understanding of the church as itself sent, (c) a reframed understanding of hospitality, (d)
contextualization of ministry, and (e) special attention to naming polarities within a given context.

Denominational leaders identified a key attribute of missional ecclesiology in terms of God’s mission preceding human activity. One executive staff member said, “I regard missional church as a reorientation of our minds and hearts toward asking, ‘What is God doing and what is God desiring?’ rather than, ‘What are we to do and what have we done and how should we do it differently?’” A primary commitment of missional ecclesiology is found in a church that focuses first on God’s activity rather than human activity. Another denominational staff member suggested that this foundational commitment “becomes a renewal movement in which we have a heightened awareness of God’s activity that changes our activity, molds our activity, and reaches into every aspect of what we do and say.” Missional ecclesiology is seen as orienting the church’s worship, education, and systemic relationships in light of God’s mission in the world. There was uniform agreement among conference leaders that a missional ecclesiology will be shaped by an understanding that God’s preceding mission sets the agenda for the church’s mission. A conference staff member said, “To be missional means that we are joining God’s reconciling work in the world. God is at work to reconcile people to himself, to each other, and to creation. The missional church joins in that work.” A regional conference minister offered his confirmation by saying that to be missional means “embracing God’s big dream for the world. God is renewing all things to himself in Christ and the church; being missional is embracing that. By embracing that, I meant participation [in that].”
Another key attribute of missional ecclesiology as described by denominational and conference leaders is the understanding of the church as no longer sending people out into mission; the church itself is sent. A denominational leader puts it this way, “It means that we can no longer take a perspective that we pay someone to do our work for us, our outreach work for us. We are compelled to look at what God is already doing in our community. . . . It’s not something far way, it is something in our community.” This leader described the “sent” nature of the missional church as “turning our chairs around to those outside the circle.” This turning around of the chairs results in an openness to change, taking risks, trying, and failing. Missional ecclesiology is reflected in “a church that is confident that God’s presence is with us . . . even if we don’t quite know what God is up to.” One denominational leader identified that embracing a missional ecclesiology requires a fundamental shift in orientation. “The very common thought about a congregation is that it is our congregation, it’s there for us, we determine what happens there.” The elected officer of the denomination called for a paradigm shift in a long-cherished value within the Mennonite Church of the “priesthood of all believers.” For a long time, many in the Mennonite Church have interpreted the priesthood of all believers to mean that the church should have a flat hierarchy of leadership. A missional perspective of the priesthood of all believers has less to do with church governance and everything to do with mission. She went on to assert, “A missional understanding of the priesthood of all believers means that ‘we are all now commissioned’ to participate in God’s mission.” This officer suggests that this is totally different from a former “generation where you send the missionaries, you commission them.” The newness of this idea and its growing influence among conference leaders is seen in a comment by the
executive conference minister, “I’ve recently been talking about the church not as the “church with a mission,” but the church as “missionary” being about God’s ministry in the world [as] an end. . . . The church is not an end. The church is the means.” These reflections suggest that there is growing awareness of what is being said in the scholarly literature and it is becoming a part of the conference’s conceptual paradigm.

In a missional frame, a particular understanding of hospitality becomes a core value that determines the shape of mission. A denominational staff member suggests that a key benchmark for Mennonite Church USA’s embodiment of a missional ecclesiology “is seen in its ability to accept the world’s hospitality, being a guest of the world. The encounter of the world happens at their bidding and not our definition.” The foundational questions asked by those leading from a missional perspective include, “Where would [the community in which I live] most welcome me? What hospitality do I need to accept?” The paradigm offered for hospitality is the sending out of the 70 in the Gospel of Luke:

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you. (Luke 10:4-8 NRSV)

Understanding how to accept the world’s hospitality is a highly contextual matter. Denominational leaders suggested that an inherent aspect of a missional ecclesiology is a focus on contextualization of ministry. This is both the promise and the peril of embracing a missional ecclesiology. One denominational staff member said, “I understand the missional thrust to be recontextualized everywhere.” This can make it
difficult to speak of ministry with any sense of generalization. One denominational leader attempted to frame the general kinds of questions that people ask when viewing ministry from a missional frame. The foundational questions asked by people leading from a missional perspective are, “What are peoples’ passions in the community where I am? Even things like ‘Does everybody show up for the football game? What are the life needs of the people? Are they poor? Are they complacently rich? What is their educational level?’”

A further refinement of the issue of context is the specific attention the missional church will pay to the polarities within a given context in order to bring healing and hope as a witness to the nearness of God’s reign. The vision statement of Mennonite Church USA is: “God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace, so that God’s healing and hope flow through us to the world” (Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, 2006, para. 1). The operational commitments of this vision will result in churches that look for polarizations present in the community that are in need of reconciliation. Examples of these polarizations include immigration, racism, and the gap between rich and poor. Identified polarities extend not only to gaps “in the world” but also to gaps within the ecumenical church, what one might refer to as “ecclesiastical tribalism,” or the increasing redistribution of Christians into like-minded congregations in light of decreasing denominational loyalty. The elected officer of Mennonite Church USA suggested that bringing healing and hope to these polarities is “bringing the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. If we don’t bring healing and hope, we don’t bring good news.”
Anti-Missional Reflection

As denominational and conference leaders shared their thoughts on missional ecclesiology, they identified a number of issues that threaten to derail the development of a missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA. Issues identified by denominational leaders include (a) constituents who see the church primarily as a vendor of therapeutic services, (b) the allure of acculturation to American individualism, and (c) a historically formed inability to receive the world’s hospitality. Among conference leaders, two issues persist among constituents that are inconsistent with a missional ecclesiology. These issues are an expectation for “successful” church planting and a penchant for replicating forms of ministry.

Among Mennonites in the current generation, denominational leaders identify a growing expectation to see the church as a vendor of therapeutic services. The question has shifted from, “How does the church help me to live out the call of Jesus?” to, “How does the church help me to live the life I’ve chosen a little bit better?” The denominational elected officer described this phenomenon, “We have bought into American psychology, ‘What’s in it for me? I don’t want to be bothered, I don’t want to be moved, shaken, stretched. I like it just for me.’ This is in direct opposition to the missional church.” An executive leader made a similar observation, “The church becomes a safe haven to soothe us so we can return to the complexity of family and work and society.” Mennonites seem to be looking to the church for the “benefit of supporting my faith and need for relationships with others who have a faith around certain definitions and customs. That may not be the ideal, but I think it’s the real.”
Another issue that threatens to derail the development of a missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA is the increasing acculturation of separatist Mennonites to American individualism. One denominational staff member suggested that Mennonites are moving away from a historic identity as alien and stranger to the world. “We’re way too comfortable. And every bit as strong as the impulse was in the past to be separate from, is now an impulse to blend in, we don’t want to be different.” Starkly stated, church members see the church’s mission, “at the worst end of the scale, as being functional until I am gone.”

While an understanding of hospitality is a core element of missional ecclesiology, the denominational leaders question whether Mennonites in the current generation are able to embrace the paradigm shift from extending hospitality to receiving hospitality. Citing research conducted by a consultant hired to guide the framing of the new denomination, an executive leader characterized the experience of Mennonites and hospitality by saying, “Mennonites are wonderful if you identify hospitality in ‘coming to be with us.’ But we are terrible in . . . accepting others’ hospitality.” In other words, Mennonites understand hospitality as accepting other people into Mennonite space so long as the space remains Mennonite space.

Conference leaders sense that an expectation of “success” in church planting persists within the conference. “Success” is understood in specific terms assuming that when a church is planted, it will prosper and grow in a linear fashion, requiring little attention to its reason for being. An elected conference officer wonders, “What paradigm is behind the thinking on [church planting]? If we plant a church, is it destined to grow and survive and flourish? If you look at history, lots of churches mentioned in the New
Testament seemed to have disappeared within 100 years or something. I compare this to an article I read not too long ago about planning a restaurant. . . . Something like two thirds of them fail in three years or something like that. Incredibly hard work. You’ve got to have a vision [and be] willing to just invest yourself; and most of them fail. And some of them do great.” This leader is suggesting that in a missional frame the purposes of God precede the strategic intent of human beings. This understanding is not operational among conference constituents.

Conference leaders have met direct and painful anti-missional thinking from their constituents who assume that church planting is about replicating the forms of existing congregations and ministry. A regional conference minister said, “If a church isn’t quite looking the way our established congregation looks, then are they really a church?” At a recent annual meeting of the conference delegates, an emerging church in the new monastic tradition was accepted into conference membership. Though the theological commitments of this church were thoroughly vetted by conference leaders, the executive conference minister related a painful exchange that surfaced from the delegate assembly: “I still shake my head when I recall the first question that came . . . when [we introduced the new church] at annual meeting, ‘Why do they want to join us when they are so different than we are?’” Related to the understanding of God’s purpose preceding human initiative is the thought that the essence of a church ought to precede its form. This understanding is not widely resident within denominational and conference constituents.

Systemic Confusion

Denominational and conference leaders believe that there is confusion within the system about what missional ecclesiology is and how to operationalize a missional
ecclesiology throughout the denomination. A denominational staff person described the state of systemic confusion over what a missional ecclesiology is. “I think that missional ecclesiology and its definition is not resident among various leaders. Be that pastors or others. I think if you asked the question to the person in the pew, one out of a thousand might be able to give you some sort of response.”

One regional conference minister said, “We’re still defining what it is, so it’s hard to think about what changes. We’ve said we don’t want to do things the way we did it ten years ago, but we don’t have anything to replace that yet and it’s still in the making.” A denominational executive also identified the highly contextual nature of missional ecclesiology as something that confounds the system theoretically and operationally: “Because there are all kinds of contexts and there are going to be all kinds of different models for doing it, in some ways what we need is for the plan to be flexible enough to handle everything, whatever comes along, but still have some ways of doing discernment, or some outlines, that we ask people to minimally fit into.”

This systemic confusion operates at a number of levels. One level of confusion is seen in the diffuse basic assumptions of the organization. Another level of confusion has to do with the struggle to shift from the 20th century view of mission as a program of the church to the 21st century missional model of the “church in mission” (Ahonen, 2004). Finally, there is confusion at the organizational level about how to align the different parts of the church to foster a missional ecclesiology throughout the system.

The current state of confusion within the system about what missional ecclesiology is relates to issues of organizational culture as described by Schein (1985). In order to understand an organization’s culture, one needs “to identify the paradigm by
which the members of a group think about, feel about, and judge situations and relationships” (p. 111). Lack of clarity within denominational culture contributes to a struggle for clarity for top denominational leaders: “Ecclesiology itself [is the problem]. We are a mix of traditional ecclesiologies . . . that are in operation, which are not in overt operation, but are subliminal things. I am having trouble with any kind of definition of, or picture of, missional ecclesiology.”

Because of the enormous influence of 20th-century missionary efforts, the church holds onto a tenacious understanding of mission as a compartmentalized program of the church. There is ongoing confusion among Mennonite Church USA constituents between “missionary” and “missional.” “That old dedication to the 20th century mission [agency] sending [workers] around the world can be understood as an expression of missional church but not the embodiment of it,” says a denominational executive. In a follow-up conversation, this person said, “In short, mission is a subset of missional church ecclesiology.”

There is a declared commitment to missional ecclesiology as the denomination’s first priority. At the organizational level, however, there does not seem to be a clear strategy for aligning the parts of the church to operationalize this priority throughout the denominational system. The attempt of a denominational executive to characterize the current state of this confusion demonstrates the struggle to articulate what is happening and what needs to be happening: “Now that we [the denomination] are committed to this, you [parts of the church] figure out what it means in your context. And we’ve gotten all these contexts and . . . we’ve got no way to put legs on the verbiage around church-wide commitments . . . that’s too categorical . . . not that we have no way . . . we struggle
mightily to find ways to put . . . to find church-wide feet under what we say we think we should mean. The other thing, institutions are programmatic which means ‘doing’ and, it’s difficult to require institutionally the aspect of missional ‘being’ rather than ‘doing’.”

Another denominational executive hinted at a possible but, as yet, underdeveloped strategy for aligning the parts of the church to operationalize a missional ecclesiology. “I don’t observe that we’ve created enough of a learning community where conferences are learning from each other. . . . Really, it’s not that we all have to be doing the same thing, but we should be learning from each other, should be encouraging and learning from each other. I don’t see a lot of that.”

Denominational and Conference Leaders on Church Planting

Denominational and conference leaders were asked to speak to the current state of church planting in Mennonite Church USA. These leaders identified a number of themes including the lack of a denominational strategy for church planting, confusion over what part of the church is responsible for the goal of developing missional congregations, and current social pressures that may be impacting resistance to church planting. The interview with conference leaders led them to reflect more specifically on the role that conference structures might play in a denominational strategy for church planting.

Lack of Strategy for Church Planting

The interview with denominational leaders surfaced an admitted lack of a denominational strategy for church planting. The dominant paradigm for church planting in the past was characterized more by individual initiative than systemic strategy. An executive director described this phenomenon: “In the recent past decades, church planting seemed to be an individual matter. The phrase was used, ‘So and so has a heart
for church planting.’ Therefore they went off and planted a church and so on. So I think we have relied upon individual discretion which is a hallmark of our understanding of church in Mennonite circles.” The elected denominational officer affirmed this characterization, adding an observation that this individualistic approach was lacking in preparation, training, and accountability. Another denominational executive said, “We are in a current stage where there doesn’t seem to be a concerted effort in church planting.” It was curious to hear a denominational executive reference individual discretion as the hallmark of the understanding of church in Mennonite circles. The hallmark of discretion in the Mennonite tradition is more often characterized by corporate discernment.

Reflecting on the conference’s track record with church planting, conference staff members represented their experience of a lack of strategy in a plethora of ways. One staff member suggested that the approach “is not real structured and intentional, like saying, ‘We’ve got to plant so many churches every so many years.’” Another staff member said, “We seem to be relatively unprepared for church plants to arise. We seem not to know how to respond, we don’t have procedures for responding to people when they come to us saying that they want to plant a church.” A regional conference minister reflected on recent history this way, “It wasn’t in anyone’s portfolio to work on and it wasn’t a particular priority. It hasn’t been a particular priority of Outreach and Service Committee to work on that end of it. They were OK with dispensing money but tended to say, ‘OK, put an advisory group together and go off and do it, then report back.’”

A conference staff member said, “The ones that have started in the past seven or eight years have all started in a different way and with different structures and unequal
funding.” A regional conference minister corroborates the denominational leaders’ understanding of individual discretion: “It’s basically started as a vision from a church planter instead of the conference.” “There hasn’t been a consistent plan or structure in place to do it.” Another conference minister added, “The observation I’ve often made is that missions committees would look around and say, ‘Here’s a city that has a bunch of Mennonites that have moved to it, we ought to start a church there for all these Mennonites that are in town.’ I think we’ve learned along the way that that doesn’t work very well because not many of those made it.” A conference staff member summarized the lack of strategy this way, “We’ve been in a time of transition ever since the inception of the conference. . . . We understood that we weren’t going to plant churches the way we used to, but we didn’t know how we were going to.”

Organization Confusion

Denominational leaders identified that the system suffers from a lack of clarity about how each part of the denomination should contribute to the development of missional congregations. One denominational executive reflected this state of confusion: “It’s debated about who and how it’s done. . . . Most people feel that it’s a good thing to do. Most people don’t have an idea how to do it. . . . It is attempted . . . more by church-wide bodies such as conferences and agencies, than it appears to be attempted by congregations. In my opinion, it is those bodies that should be encouraging congregations to do that . . . but that’s a stretch.” Another denominational staff member felt that the situation is even less clear: “We had a kind of denomination-down thrust on church planting. . . . But it doesn’t seem to be a focus of denomination-wide activity.” This staff member concluded his remarks by saying, “And some would even wonder if it’s an
appropriate effort of the church.” This points to another issue contributing to the lack of a strategy for developing missional congregations: ambivalence toward church planting.

Denominational leaders suggested that throughout the system one finds ambivalence toward the idea of church planting. This ambivalence was described at the denominational level by one denominational staff member, “Even though there have been declarations made in the past . . . saying that now we are going to have a goal of [church planting] as a church-wide priority, it has been more talk than action.” The elected denominational officer reflected on listening to regional constituents’ concerns about new church-planting initiatives: “I think when we talk about church planting for some of us coming out of the Midwest; we have a negative response to that because of frequent failure which is a case of gaps in the training and accountability [and] some gaps in the nurturing process. Therefore I sense there’s some cynicism, ‘Well, there’s more money going down a rat hole.’ Forgive the crassness.” The other reason cited for this ambivalence has to do with the aforementioned issues of individualism and acculturation. The denominational leaders share a perspective that more Mennonite constituents want to be a part of a church that can provide for their felt personal needs and fewer are willing to commit to a new initiative due to fear of what it might require. As one staff member said, “People are less interested in being a part of a church planting effort. They haven’t quite caught a vision for the church that is beyond themselves.”

In slight contrast to denominational leaders, conference leaders reflected on the organizational confusion with more urgency. They feel confused about the nature of the role of conference staff within the larger denominational system. There is an intuitive inclination among conference personnel to expect that the denominational leadership
would give strategic attention to the development of such a paradigm. The elected conference officer asked in exasperation, “Who presently is in charge?” A conference minister said, “We haven’t developed a denominational church planting strategy and resources [for that]. That’s not there. It’s up to the conferences to do it.” While identifying that conferences need to go ahead, this staff member immediately turned the issue back to denominational leaders, “But are they [denominational leaders] developing models, resources, and structures? I haven’t seen that. There doesn’t seem to be an overall sense of strategy or model or whatever.” Another staff member wondered if something might be gained if the denominational leadership simply allows the strategy to emerge at the conference level. “I think there is something refreshing about each conference wrestling with what it means to plant churches. I’d have a little bit of concern if Mennonite Church USA would have one structure that all our conferences would be expected to plug into.” Yet this staff member concluded his own remarks with less certainty, “On the other hand, it would be nice to have somebody come and help each conference think through how they are doing this. We are kind of on our own, I feel. But I do not want to be handed a plan.”

Social Pressure Impacting Church Planting

Beyond the theological and internal organizational issues that pose challenges to developing missional congregations, denominational and conference leaders identify certain social pressures that may negatively impact church-planting initiatives. The first of these pressures leaders interpret as increasing acculturation that results in a growing ambivalence toward organized religion and a worldview that increasingly reflects
postmodern as well as post-Christendom qualities. The second pressure comes from the current political climate relative to immigration.

Growing acculturation among Mennonites is itself a sign of ambivalence toward the form of church they have known. A denominational executive reflected that one important role of denominational leadership is to perpetuate and expand a certain understanding of the Christian walk in light of the Anabaptist tradition. He went on to speak of some level of ambivalence among constituents: “We debate about whether [a commitment to the Anabaptist tradition] is a majority position in the Mennonite Church any more. I think that’s questionable.” Another denominational staff member was concerned that “people are less willing to suggest that faith is something that they want to share with others.”

As a denomination that has been largely made up of and led by people of western European descent, conference leaders cited social pressures of acculturation within the historic Mennonite culture as contributing to complexity of church planting. One conference leader observed, “If the Mennonite Church is becoming too easily acculturated to consumerism and the capitalist American society, [the new] groups have a hard time giving their kids role models . . . for living as Christ’s alternative community.” The immigrant, racial/ethnic groups that are seeking to plant Mennonite Churches “are trying to be a part of a church that is already struggling with acculturation.” This leader suggests that the challenges posed by acculturation might also point to an important corrective if traditional Mennonite Churches and new immigrant churches dialogue together: “In this post-Christian, postmodern society, this very traditional Mennonite Church [is] becoming acculturated more than they realize. And so then you have these
church plants who . . . sometimes have a keener eye toward where the rest of us are being acculturated, where we might not even realize it. And they might be able to point those things out to us because it gives them *and their youth* problems.”

As shown in chapter 2, some aspects of a post-Christendom context include a constellation of divergent values: privatized religion, individualism, new community movements, religious relativism, and a desire for simplicity and clearness (Hempelmann, 2003, pp. 45-46). These trends and their corresponding anti-trends suggest that it is no longer possible to talk about an expectation that the world is moving toward Christian normalization (Peachey, 1965). One denominational executive pointed with clarity to this social pressure, “Do I believe that we are part of a larger trend in the North and particularly following Europe in which the church is becoming less and less an important part of society? Absolutely. And it’s clear among our members, not just society.” Another executive’s observations spoke to the weariness people experience with social complexity: “Goodness, life is not getting less complicated with all of us in North American society, our lives are complex; we don’t need more complexity.” Further conversation on post-Christendom pressures surfaced: “We don’t even assume or expect that our commitment to the church is the primary commitment that we carry. It’s kind of compartmentalized, it is something that is part of our understanding, but there are all kinds of other things that compete for our time, our attention, and our allegiance.”

The realities of globalization and multiculturalism exert pressure on the church’s attempts to develop missional congregations across cultures. A denominational staff member’s observation suggested that denominational executive leaders, who are largely White, have a steep learning curve in understanding how to address this growing reality,
“We [only] flirt with the idea that the church exists for other cultures besides our own. I don’t like these explanations, but at any rate, there they are.”

For church plants targeted toward specific ethnic enclaves, conference leaders said that immigration issues and language barriers place heavy burdens on the growth and development of new congregations. Of these ethnic groups at large, the elected conference officer said, “They are all trying to find room to live in George Bush’s new America. For all of the immigrants, especially if they’re refugees or undocumented workers [there is] lots of uncertainty and fear. They’re struggling to fit into this wider American pie along with the church pie. You get some of the more White groups (of Mennonites) in a [major metropolitan area within our conference] battering on the walls from the other direction saying, ‘There’s something more than mainstream America to being in God’s realm.’” People who join the church from various ethnic groups face enormous challenges as they attempt to be true to new spiritual commitments while maintaining relationships with relatives. “The ethnic congregations in particular struggle with generational changes, particularly with language, where the older folks still want to use the mother tongue and the kids are trying to become acculturated as fast as they can.”

A regional conference minister pointed to the increased challenges immigrants face since September 11. “Immigration issues are a challenge. You get a group and think things are finally turning a corner and the next thing you know they’re all gone because there’s a raid in the community.

**Church Planting and the Role of Conference**

The conversation with conference leaders around organizational confusion led them to imagine what role the conference might be best positioned to play in a strategy
for church planting. As conference leaders began to reflect on their unique role in the
denominational system, several things began to happen. First, they began to describe
what they believed they were best positioned to offer in the area of church planting.
Second, they described the difficulty of interfacing with those who want to plant churches
when there is no pattern in place. Third, they described qualities necessary for church
planters and the struggles that are unique to church planters.

Because conferences are uniquely positioned between denominational structures
and congregations, conference leaders attempt to be highly accessible to congregations
and serve as a key source of assessing what’s happening “on the ground” for
denominational leaders. These leaders believe that a key contribution they can make in
church planting is providing connections. A regional conference minister said,
“[Conference] provides connections. I saw the benefit by attending the meeting of
[church planters]. It was the first time the church planters came together. And there was
an energy, it energized them and they said, ‘Finally conference is paying attention to us.
We’re not a lone ranger out there.’ And I think that was important. It connected them to
conference in a new kind of way. It communicated to them that conference cared enough
about them to bring them together to listen to their story.’” Another conference minister
concurred, “Being able to make connections . . . offers all kinds of different ways of
support and probably resources too in terms of people resources and some of those kinds
of things. . . . I think that’s a key role.” The elected conference officer related the role of
making connections to a theological image: “The comment I was going to make was the
connecting that can go on in what is theologically referred to in ‘body’ imagery. Remind
these groups that they are not lone rangers out by themselves. That part of connecting is
about connecting them with other entities that are somewhat similar to them even if they are quite a distance away. And the other sort of connecting is to connect them with other parts of the Christian community which maybe don’t look quite like them. . . . They’re part of the larger body of Christ and should be concerned with each other, should be getting acquainted, should be finding ways to support each other whether materially or in other ways.”

This conversation on connections led conference leaders to reflect on possible roles they could play in connecting church planters to resources for training and strategy outside the conference in the future. One staff person said, “Conference ought to be providing some tools for church planting. If [we can’t] become experts in church planting then let’s develop connections with someone who is and then connect them to these church planters. The relationship is important . . . but then there’s also, ‘How does one go about this from a practical standpoint? How is one equipped to be a church planter? Where are the models that are out there? What are the skills one needs?’ Conference ought to be trying to provide those skills and tools to church planters.” Another conference minister suggested another key role by raising the question of strategy to those who propose to plant churches. Conference ministers are in a unique position to ask key strategic questions: “Is there a plan? Do you have a target? Is this a plan that other churches in the area support?” This role was further developed by suggesting that conference ministers may be in the position to derail poor planning, “Sometimes somebody needs to say, ‘This isn’t going to work.’”

Conference leaders made a distinction between conference providing resources and connecting church planters to resources. This emphasis surfaced as conference staff
members talked about the huge array of resources that any church planter with the internet can access. One conference minister said, “We don’t need to be resource centers at conference because churches can go find stuff wherever they want to. All they have to do is get on the internet and they’ve got their fingers in wherever, and so, and so that’s a whole other set of dynamics that we haven’t quite figured out what to do with or how to work with. [For one church planter] it doesn’t matter if it’s [one] or [another conference], he can be in touch with them just as easily as he can be in touch with any of us.” The accessibility of training and support tools was seen as both defining the role conference ministers play and also highlighting a potential peril where theological differences are concerned.

Conference ministry staff members are not sure how to provide leadership when there are no patterns. Since its inception, the conference in focus for this study has not initiated church planting. Of those churches currently being planted, none have originated as a conference-led initiative. Nevertheless, the vision for new congregations continues to develop at the grassroots, in spite of the lack of conference-level strategy. One staff member said, “We seem to be relatively unprepared for church plants to arise. We seem not to know how to respond. We don’t have procedures for responding to people when they come to us saying that they want to plant a church.” This finds conference leaders scrambling to get ahead of a process that results in unequal resource distribution and attention. “The ones that have started in the past seven or eight years have all started in a different way and with different structures and unequal funding.”

Conference leaders do have active relationships with those planting churches. They naturally reflect on the qualities they want to see in those who are planting
churches. They also identify the places where they see church planters facing unique struggles. A regional conference minister offered, “I think of words like ‘visionary,’ somebody with tenacity, that can dream and see it through . . . passion.” In language that reflects clearer missional thinking, one conference leader hopes for “deep faith” and a “commitment to an incarnational ministry, where they believe that the church and Christians are to embody Christ, and in that way meet the needs of the people around them.” Reflecting on her experience with church planters, this staff member said, “They are committed to being Anabaptist, theologically Mennonite,” yet, “they are not limited by old paradigms. Most of them are ready to see the new thing that God might be doing in their community and among their people.”

In reflecting on positive qualities for church planters, a regional conference minister began to hint at the struggles that are unique to the church-planting experience. This staff member sees a “commitment to a vision . . . in the face of tremendous obstacles.” A key struggle for church planters is to figure out how to provide for their livelihood while planting the new church. Another regional conference minister, with past experience as a church planter himself, suggested that church planters need to consider the complexity of being bi-vocational. “I began by saying church planting is hard work. I think church planting as a bi-vocational pastor is hard work. Especially when you get above 50 [years old] and your energy isn’t what it used to be.” Conference leaders observe that church planters aren’t sure how they fit into the rest of the system: “I think they struggle to be understood by other pastors and conference leaders. . . . They struggle to know whether to make their needs known.” Other struggles that surfaced
included more practical matters such as money for health insurance and guarding family
time, particularly for those who have small children.

Summary

This chapter explored the ways denominational and conference leaders describe
the development of an emerging missional ecclesiology within Mennonite Church USA
and the state of church planting as an initiative of the denomination’s priority to develop
missional congregations. Several important themes emerged. Denominational and
conference leaders described three issues in the development of a missional ecclesiology:
a growing ability to describe a missional ecclesiology, anti-missional thinking that
threatens to derail the development of a missional ecclesiology, and confusion within the
denominational system about what missional ecclesiology is and how it is operationalized
within the denomination.

Denominational and conference leaders also reflected on the state of church
planting in Mennonite Church USA. The denominational and conference leaders
identified three important themes that pose challenges to church-planting initiatives.
These themes are the lack of a denominational strategy for church planting, confusion
over what part of the church is responsible for the initiative to develop missional
congregations, and external and internal social pressures that may be contributing to
member resistance to becoming involved in church planting. Conference leaders reflected
specifically on the role that conference might best play in a church-planting strategy.
CHAPTER V

CASE STUDIES

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the processes whereby church planters and key stakeholders develop common understanding about the nature of the churches that are being planted. The study explores these processes in four cases. These cases all have a formal relationship with the same regional Midwestern conference of Mennonite Church USA. The cases represent a diversity of ethnic and rural/urban contexts. The cases involve a church plant among a Hispanic population in a small city, a Hmong population in a major metropolitan city, an Anglo population in a small city, and a multi-ethnic group in a major metropolitan city. The diversity of contexts and ethnicity will provide information-rich cases. In this chapter, each case is described as well as the themes that emerged.

Iglesia Menonita

In 2003, Raul and Maria Castro moved from the Pacific Northwest to a rural area in the Midwest to plant a Hispanic church in a small city that is home to a major university. After graduating from college and a certificate program in pastoral ministry from seminary, Raul and Maria moved to Oregon in 1991 to join the pastoral team in an Anglo church with the intention of starting a new church for a growing Hispanic
community. With the support of local leaders, Raul was able to begin two churches that continue to thrive.

The vision for a new church in the Midwest began with Carlos, the pastor of the Hispanic Mennonite Church in a small city approximately 40 miles from the location of the prospective church plant. Carlos had started a Bible study with several families who lived in the prospective city but traveled 40 miles each week to worship at Carlos’s church on Sundays. As the Bible study group began to develop an identity, Carlos invited Raul and Maria to move to the area and plant a church for this group. The pastor told Raul that the area conference provides money for salaries to those who want to plant new churches although the pastor had not spoken with anyone in conference leadership about the plan to start a new church. After a time of prayer and discernment, Raul and Maria left Oregon and moved in with Carlos and his wife until they could find housing. Raul and Maria came up against three immediate problems. The first was, unbeknownst to Carlos, a few months prior to the arrival of the Castro family the conference had placed a moratorium on offering salary subsidies to church planters. The second problem was that the members of the Bible study group who were supposed to be the nucleus of a new church were unwilling to transfer their pastoral loyalty from Carlos to Raul. Suddenly Raul and Maria had no income, no place to call home, and no infrastructure to provide guidance. The third problem was that once Raul and Maria began meeting with conference leaders and once the intended nucleus for the new church signaled their allegiance to Carlos, Carlos abdicated his involvement in the process entirely.

Prior to his disengagement, Carlos took Raul and Maria to meet with a regional conference minister to share their vision for planting a new church. The regional
conference minister recalled, “They came to my office and shared their vision for starting a new church and [they were] asking what kind of help there would be available from conference. So I told them I would take their request to the Outreach Committee of conference. . . . One [thing] we thought important to do was to start a ministry advisory council” to provide local oversight and support for this developing ministry. Because the intent was to plant a church in the university town, the chair of the conference’s Outreach Committee invited members of the local Anglo congregation to hear Raul’s and Maria’s vision. After a 6-month period of discernment, the Anglo church appointed two members of their church to the ministry advisory committee and agreed to provide space for the new church to worship.

Raul and Maria have been members of the Mennonite church for about 30 years. Those who meet the couple are struck by their warmth and non-defensive demeanor. They inspire trust and are utterly disarming. Originally from Texas, their ancestral roots are in Mexico, and Spanish is their first language. Raul is soft spoken, ever the diplomat. Maria is much more forthright, one might even say blunt, though not off-putting, in her communication style. In the interview with Raul, Maria, and members of their ministry advisory committee, the participants recounted the challenges of attempting to plant this church. Their journey is marked by undying perseverance and fraught with experiences of disappointment and misunderstanding. After 5 years of working at developing a new congregation, the Castros do not have a core worshiping body. A second interview was conducted with Raul, Maria, and their conference minister to explore some of the complexities of their experience. The interviews surfaced six themes: positive missional
reflection, anti-missional reflection, systemic confusion, the role of church planter, challenges to progress, and cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Positive Missional Reflection

Participants in this experiment expressed a common missional understanding that God’s mission precedes human initiative. The chair of the advisory committee reflected on her sense that God was at work in the broader community: “I had been shopping at El Baso, the little store on Highway 6, and as I was giving them these flyers about this new church starting up, there were also flyers about the Catholic church starting a Spanish-speaking church. And then much later, sometime this past year, I guess, I found out that the Nazarene church had . . . the same vision in about the same time and I really have a sense that God was working in different churches to reach out. Now it also was because the statistics were showing, the census statistics and in the news and everything, were showing that there was a growing population.”

Other group members talked about human initiative in mission as planting seeds but expecting that God is providing the context in which those seeds grow. One committee member said, “I think seeds are being planted and we just have to pray and stand beside [Raul and Maria] and wait for God to . . . make the seeds sprout. The conference minister echoed this sentiment, “We do plant the seed, but recognize that it’s God who does the growing . . . and so I think that’s the theological framework that we operate under.”

The participants in the interviews talked clearly about the theological commitments they hold in common. The advisory committee chair said, “We are committed to Anabaptist beliefs and theology.” The conference minister affirmed Raul’s
and Maria’s theological commitments as consistent with the core beliefs of Mennonite Church USA: “We want this church to be at home in Mennonite Anabaptist theology.” These commitments are consistent with a missional perspective that seeks to demonstrate an incarnational ministry. The chair of the advisory committee and the conference minister spoke of the Castros’ desire to provide a holistic ministry. “I see Raul and Maria being concerned about the spiritual aspect of people as well as reaching out to meeting human need. You [Raul and Maria] have been outstanding in reaching out to people where the needs are.” The advisory committee chair concurred, “You’re ministering to people that are not being reached out to by other churches, other people a lot of times, so I think that the ministry advisory council affirms that. Like when you went into Broadway and shared bread and conversation, um, with people in a very difficult neighborhood. And a lot of churches aren’t doing that. Not just because they’re not Spanish speakers.”

Anti-Missional Thinking

In spite of some evidence of missional thinking within this group, there is also a tendency to think in terms of replicating past experience from a former context. This is not terribly surprising given the lapse in support Raul counted on receiving when he arrived. The formation of advisory committee itself was a borrowed model. Raul reflected on his previous church-planting experience: “One of the things that we did over there [in Oregon] . . . we started a . . . ministry advisory council. We met once a month and then I did some reporting, had a prayer group just like we’re doing here. I think that’s one of the things that I requested . . . because that’s the experience I had prior.”
Though Raul and Maria spent considerable time researching the community in which they were hoping to plant a church, they borrowed a former approach to ministry that did not require them to reside in the context of ministry. Housing in a university city tends to be very expensive and so Raul and Maria chose to acquire housing in a town 30 miles away. Raul and Maria explained, “Our experience in Oregon was that we lived in another city, we didn’t live in the same city we had the church. We had the church in Aurora, and we lived in Canby and then we moved farther into Wilsonville and still had the church.” Maria continued, “It wasn’t a problem, you know, to live in one town and have the church in [another]. That’s why, when we came here, we don’t see it like an obstacle. . . . We’re going to live in [this town], we’re not going to make [our home] in [the university city].” Living 30 miles from the context of ministry has been a concern shared by ministry advisory committee members and other interested constituents. The committee chair acknowledged that they have asked at a number of points, “Is [the university city] the right place? They always say yes, so then we kind of defer to them and then we might bring it up later, or somebody at First Mennonite will ask and I’ll bring it to the table again and we’ll talk. . . . I have been approached by several people and questioned by several people, particularly, that Raul and Maria don’t live in [the university city].” When asked what the group might have done differently in this process, the advisory committee chair said, “I would have asked them to live in [the university city] . . . if the ultimate plan is to have a church [there].” Maria responded with a deep sigh, “I’m not going [there].” Because missional ecclesiology is highly contextual, a reliance on what worked in another situation and an unwillingness to consider living in the context of ministry in the current situation is an example of anti-missional thinking.
Systemic Confusion

Raul and Maria landed in the Midwest just as the regional conference was in the midst of a paradigm shift with regard to church planting. The conference minister reflected to Raul and Maria, “You came to us at a time when we’re in the middle, in between plans. We are saying that the previous model that we were following no longer is working. . . . We’re in this awkward stage in which we are putting together this model which will guide us into the future and it’s not together yet.” Raul responded, “Well there is no model.” The chair of the conference’s Outreach committee said, “Suddenly there came this request: these people want to plant a church, now what can you do? And that was frustrating . . . because I didn’t know what was the right thing to do. It wasn’t because of you [Raul and Maria]; it was because of my disconnectedness. And one of the things we needed to do was make several significant decisions about in what ways and how much shall this conference committee help? But our conference committee didn’t have the preparations made to make those kind of decisions yet. We weren’t ready for you people to come [laughter]. And, uh, I think the best we can say is that God was pushing us pretty hard to get ready even when we weren’t ready.”

Reflections on the Role of Church Planter

In the midst of systemic confusion, Raul and Maria reflected on their experience as church planters over the last 5 years. When asked about his experience in the Midwest, Raul said, “Well from my perspective, it’s been highs and lows. It’s been disheartening, discouraging at times; it’s been confusing as well. We thought we knew what God was calling us to do and as time has gone by we kind of question him, asking again, ‘Did I misunderstand?’” Raul identifies a frustrating difference between his former context and
the current one. “I didn’t have to work full-time in Oregon, I didn’t have to work full-time, I just concentrated my efforts in church planting so that was just one difference. Here I’m dividing my time in three or four areas. . . . It’s doable, but it takes much longer than when you give your full effort into it.” In spite of disappointment, Raul and Maria both continue to nurture a sense of hope for their work. “But I feel pretty positive that we didn’t make a mistake in coming out [here]. I feel okay about it.” Maria concurred, “For me, it’s exciting even if we don’t have the people right now. You know we have people sometimes, we do not have people sometimes. But to plant the seed is the most important thing. I told Raul, ‘We’ve been planting, planting, planting, planting. I think the time is coming. People are going to start to show up.’ I know [there are] a lot of needs . . . I feel like sometimes we don’t do anything but at the same time when I see, you know, somebody call me to pray for this lady in [our town], she was very sick . . . we have to be very patient.”

As Raul and Maria continued to think back over the past 5 years, Raul began to explore his own contribution to the current situation: “I should have been more prepared. And right now I feel that I probably wasn’t, or didn’t communicate as well as I thought I had.” When asked about this, he continued, “I feel like I was kind of passive in the conversation. And I [said], ‘OK, whatever,’ you know? Feeling that, yeah, God called me here so God’s gonna support me anyway and in any way that I need it. . . . I think I would have changed my conversation.”

Maria reflects on her experience, recalling her initial unwillingness to move to the Midwest. “Well, I wasn’t prepared to come to here. I was very happy in Oregon, I don’t want to leave the church, I don’t want to leave my ministry over there and come here. It
was very hard for me because we started all over again.” She distinguished her experience from Raul’s, “For a man, it’s OK. They pack the things and leave. For women, it’s another story, you know? Seems like, for men, it’s, ‘Okay, let’s go.’ For us, you know, it’s very hard. . . . I came because he says the Lord called him, so I have to follow him, right?” Maria abruptly changed her attitude and said, “But at the same time, I feel happy to do the Lord’s job if I have to move, you know? I make peace in my heart. . . . I had to start and help Raul because it’s not only his call, it’s my call too. You know, if God called him, God is calling me too to work for [God] and even if it is hard, I enjoy myself doing it too. And I don’t think I would ever change this job. I told Raul, if he dies first, believe me, I’m not stopping the ministry.” While Maria expressed her reluctance to move, she also expresses her willingness, though it is unclear how her own sense of call balances with her sense of duty.

Challenges to Progress

The 5-year attempt to plant this church has been fraught with challenges. These challenges include lack of time, lack of money, and, at times, a lack of support from the ministry advisory committee. The conference minister observed that the lack of time is a frustration shared by Raul and Maria and the ministry advisory committee. “I don’t know if it’s sadness or frustration with lack of resources, [but] I see Raul and Maria pulled in so many different directions. They have to work in order to live, to eat and to make their house payments, to pay bills. And I see that as both being in some ways a distraction from starting a church, but at the same time it’s in those places of work that they meet people and are involved in ministry.”
Raul and Maria are slow to talk about money. Maria confessed, “We [aren’t used to asking] for money, so I feel embarrassed to ask for money. Um, I don’t, I’m not that kind of person, ‘can you help me?’ I prefer to get up, go to work, than ask for money. I don’t know. I didn’t grow up like that.” On the other hand, Maria describes a reality that is quite different today from when Raul received a full-time salary, “But I saw Raul getting work a lot in the church. We got involved a lot in the church, we don’t have this, ‘Well I have to get up at 5 o’clock in the morning, go to work and come back and I’m so tired and I have to go and visit, you know?’ It’s hard, you know? And then, um, when you go to visit, in [the university city], you don’t come home at 6 o’clock. You come at 10 o’clock, 11 sometimes, to your house, get up at 5 o’clock, you don’t sleep a lot.” Raul and Maria also cited rising fuel prices as an unforeseen obstacle to trying to establish substantive relationships in a town 35 miles away from where they live.

Raul and Maria find it difficult to express their frustrations over the lack of support they sometimes feel from the advisory committee. Raul said, “I’m very appreciative of the [support we receive], so I have to be careful for what I say because I like the people.” During the interview with only Raul, Maria, and their conference minister present they began to speak more specifically to the ways they want to be supported. Raul said, “I need a team of people, 3, 4, or 5 people who will commit themselves to help me start this church. Maybe visiting people, people with gifts in music, maybe somebody to help with little kids, for teaching Bible stories, or whatever, just a team to help me.” Raul feels that the advisory committee genuinely cares about his ministry but he wishes they would get directly involved in ministry activities. “[I need them] to be involved more directly, to be a part of this ministry.”
Recently, Raul and Maria began meeting in a worship space provided free of charge by a Christian church of another denomination by the river in [the university city]. Last spring, the city was ravaged by flooding and just as a core group of worshipers was beginning to form, the building was flooded and they lost their worship space. This, of course, was devastating to Raul and Maria and they were disappointed at the lack of attention advisory committee members paid during that time. “When we opened the church in [the university city], when it got flooded, nobody came from [the advisory committee]. I don’t know that anyone came from the advisory committee.” Maria suggested that this is part of a larger trend, “They don’t come and ask, ‘What are you doing?’ We need to understand you guys . . .” Raul interrupted Maria and said gently but with pain, “Okay . . . so . . . Okay, what is it? One, two, three, four years have gone by and still nobody is coming and saying, ‘How can we help?’”

Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding

Misunderstanding abounds in this case. In the second interview with only the Castros and the conference minister present, the participants were able to begin to describe the nature of this misunderstanding. Their comments fell into three categories: cultural misunderstanding, financial inequity, and exclusive ecclesiastical tribalism.

In the first interview, Raul tried to be even-handed with regard to the issue of culture as he shared during the interview with the advisory committee members present. “I think a lot of what’s happened has been cultural. I’m not sure if that’s the right phrase or not. Misunderstanding. I think sometimes we talk past each other. Because, uh, maybe culture, language, and I think that’s been [part of it] . . . and I try to understand a lot and sometimes I don’t.” In the smaller group interview, Raul and Maria became much more
candid about how they understand the way issues of culture to contribute to misunderstanding. Maria said, “One of the things, maybe you don’t understand us or we don’t understand you, or something, is that White people, sorry if I call you White people, White people are completely different from Hispanics. It’s not easy. What I see in here and in Indiana and Oregon or wherever I live, it’s not easy to have a church from one day to another one or one month to another one. . . . You know, sometimes they have expectations like, ‘You’re going to have a church, you’re going to start a church, and next year you’re supposed to have 100 people . . . right?’ So I hear, you know, ‘Why don’t you have a lot of people, why don’t people come?’ I don’t know why people come and leave. . . . I don’t know how you guys are, but Hispanic people move a lot. . . . They’re not happy over here? The next day, they say, ‘Bye. Good bye,’ they leaving, you know?”

The issue of cultural misunderstanding was connected to how the advisory committee and the Castros have related around issues of money. Maria described a poignant example of this confusion. “I mean, I don’t know how you guys work, you Whites? We Hispanics, when we give somebody something, we don’t go and ask. . . . It happened to one of our friends when they came from Oregon to Goshen. . . . That Hispanic church gave some money because they were students and they had a family, and then sent a White guy to give the money to them . . . and he was, ‘I came to bring you this money from the church but let’s go to the store because I need to see what you’re going to buy’ And [the Hispanic student] said, ‘You know what, take your money and go back, I don’t need your money.’”

Raul and Maria believe that the advisory committee has made them feel that they were not trustworthy with the money they have received for the support of their work.
“I’m very appreciative of the [the small amounts of support we have received], so I have to be careful for what I say because I like the people. . . . In talking with pastor Tom, he didn’t feel like that happened, but sometimes it felt to me like we talked a lot, a lot about money, and it made me feel, it made me feel almost like they don’t trust us with monies. . . . And I know, I know that we need to do some kind of reporting, uh, for example in the beginning we went around and around and around the table whether we needed to report what the conference gives us whether it was . . . so it was just kind of, we went around with that . . . whether I was employed by the conference or not, we kind of defined that . . . and then we decided that we didn’t have to give a report because it was going to our living expenses.” The issue of mistrust causes Raul to feel that he is seen as inadequate in the eyes of the advisory committee. “Nothing’s happened . . . and that’s when I went to one meeting and I feel bad that nothing’s happened and conference has paid me money and I’m sorry, I have to apologize. . . . We came to that because there’s been points throughout that we’ve felt that, uh, well, if I had the money, I’d give it back.”

These feelings of inadequacy heighten Raul’s and Maria’s sensitivity to the feeling that others in conference do not take them seriously. Raul was asked to lead a workshop on immigration issues at the conference’s annual delegate assembly. Immigration and undocumented workers had been a politically volatile issue in the Midwest at the time. Some in the audience took issue with Raul’s compassion toward undocumented immigrants. Maria found this deeply hurtful. “I don’t want to go back to that conference you guys have every year. . . . I left very disappointed with White people. Not from you. Not from you (pointing to the conference minister and myself). Because the way they were speaking in the seminar, like they don’t care, they were so angry.
What are those immigrants doing here? And one guy told Raul, ‘So what are you talking about, what do you care, if you live here, why do you care, what you talking about?’ And I was like [whispering], ‘Oh, my God, and they say they are Christians?’ Because they invite me to come speak is why I’m here. I’m very, very disappointed.”

Raul and Maria eventually began receiving a small stipend from the conference for their ministry expenses. They have felt that the conference has not treated them in a way that is financially consistent with others involved in ministry within the conference. Raul reflected on the beginning stages of their ministry in the conference when they were under the impression by the Muscatine Mennonite pastor that the conference would provide a salary for them. In response to the small stipend Raul received he said, “I felt uncomfortable with the money that was offered. I said, ‘OK, I’m here, I can’t go anywhere. That was the passive side of me. . . . Then I asked a question, ‘Well, if somebody else starts a church, are you going to give them [the same money]?’ Raul raised that question after being offered $1,200 but seeing in the conference’s annual budget that the Hmong church was slated to receive $48,000. (The Hmong Mennonite Church was started before the conference moratorium on providing salary subsidies to church planters and the total dollars Raul referred to do not match the conference spending plan for that year.)

The conference minister added another aspect of the financial inequity that the Castros experience. “Part of the money that comes from the conference that comes on a monthly basis is not always issued in a timely manner. There have been months where they have come to the middle of the month and they haven’t gotten a check. . . . Then there’s feelings of, ‘Well you don’t really respect me, or is it because I am Hispanic?’”
The other area that contributes to misunderstanding has to do with ethnic ecclesiastical tribalism. Raul reflects on his initial meetings with church leaders in the conference where he felt those in the meetings greeted him with mistrust and skepticism. At one level, Raul believed this was understandable. “When I came, yeah, nobody knew me. I came out of the blue, I guess. Nobody had the vision except me and [Carlos]. So I thought the only people who would help me were you guys [local Anglo Mennonite leaders] because you were in the immediate area. And then I go to this meeting and I get asked all these questions. After the meeting, I’m left [feeling] abandoned. There was no support. Everybody knew why I was here but nobody said, ‘What do you need? How can we help?’ Maybe I [made] a wrong assumption, I’m a Mennonite, I’ve been a Mennonite.” I know they saw me as Hispanic and probably said, ‘He’s a Mennonite?’”

Raul and Maria are confused by the cold reception they have received since moving to the Midwest. Raul said, “Well I’ve been in Oregon, I’ve been a Mennonite in Oregon. Started a church. And still, the questions. So even then, it was kind of a feeling like, uh, we don’t know who you are. And you were right. It was us too. But that felt uncomfortable.” Raul continued to reflect on the way his Mennonite identity is not recognized by others: “I’ve been in the Mennonite church for that long [30 years]. And consider myself to be a Mennonite. And feel like I [must not be] acting Mennonite; theologically I think I’m Mennonite. Anabaptist. So I, when I came out here, I didn’t come out here as a stranger. But felt like a stranger. Made felt like a stranger. I remember being [bombarded with questions when I arrived here].”

Raul feels that Christians of other traditions have been more receptive than the Mennonite Christians with whom he shares common theological commitments. When
Raul and Maria were looking for a place for their church to meet, they were surprised by how long it took the local Anglo Mennonite Church to process their request for worship space to meet on Sunday afternoons. “I was disappointed. I was disappointed because I thought I already sat around a table and was bombarded by a whole bunch of questions. And so I asked if I could use somewhere in their building, and it took them six months to decide. And I know they probably have a policy.” In contrast, Maria described the experience of requesting meeting space from another Christian church, “Well, you know what? When we went to this other church by the river, the other church, that Raul walked into, the church that got flooded with water, how long did it take? Maybe a month, two months? No! They said *that day*, ‘Come and use our church, we’d love to have you guys. . . . What do you need, how can we help you.’ And so wow! They even went to visit with us in the beginning. And I said, “Oh, my God.” In contrast, Maria feels a lot of rejection from the Mennonite community in which she lives. Beginning to cry, she said, “And this is what I don’t understand about this area, why, why are they so cold? People are cold, you know, you feel like what are we doing in here? I told Raul, what are we doing here? Better leave to another place. We don’t have to be here.”

To summarize, Raul offers the following reflection on the overall experience of church planting in the current context, “Well, it’s not been easy. . . . It’s been difficult, it’s been a difficult road, and I just ask myself, ‘Where are we going? How can I get there? Or go anywhere?’ But it has been difficult . . . frustrating. . . . Thank you for listening. . . . Thank you for the ideas . . . and, we can maybe move forward with that. . . . Hopefully we’ve been helpful to you.”
Raul and Maria Castro have been working tirelessly at planting a church in a university city for the past 5 years while living in a smaller town 35 miles away. Theologically, the church they seek to plant bears some of the marks of a missional ecclesiology. Their primary model for developing the church is their past experience in a West Coast context. Because of the way they were invited to the area, they have encountered significant confusion within the conference system as the conference is in transition to developing a new church-planting strategy. The Castros face ongoing challenges to progress that include lack of time, lack of money, and, at times, a lack of support from the ministry advisory committee. Persistent misunderstanding in the system complicates the development of a cooperative experience with conference leaders and their advisory committee. Aspects of this misunderstanding include cultural misunderstanding, financial inequity, and exclusive ecclesiastical tribalism.

Community Mennonite Church

Community Mennonite Church began meeting for worship on November 5, 2006. The fledging community has been meeting for worship on the first and third weekend of every month. The leadership expects this pattern to continue until the congregation grows to a critical mass of people to carry a fuller schedule of weekly meetings for worship. I gathered with a group of seven key stakeholders for an evening conversation about their church. The group was made up of three married couples and one married woman whose husband was not able to attend. The participants were all under 40 years of age. The lead church planter, Darrell, a seminary graduate, talked about how the vision for this church emerged. “The idea came to us as Pete and Mary and we were driving from this area to [our former] Mennonite Church [about 90 minutes away]. For Karen and I, it just came
up as having kids whom we wanted to grow up in the Mennonite Church and with all that meant to us. Realizing that driving more than an hour was not sustainable, and Pete and Mary were also driving [the same distance], it started as a joke, ‘Hey we ought to start a church or something.’ With time that just started to grow and something I just started to grow with and Pete, who’s a guy who likes to make things happen, also started to run with the idea and one day we just decided to commit to it.” Darrell, Karen, Pete, and Mary shared their vision with [their former] Mennonite Church, where both couples were members, and “they were supportive.”

Darrell admits that the articulation of the vision for the congregation was largely his work. Since they were a group of two families, “I didn’t see the point of putting everyone in the church on a committee to work on the vision. So I wrote one.” Darrell’s statement appears on the back of their bulletins for each worship service. It reads, “Community Mennonite Church is a member of the [the conference in focus for this study] of Mennonite Church USA. Committed to a common life of discipleship under the lordship of Jesus, we meet to worship God and encourage one another in faithful living in a fallen world. Sharing historical values of Anabaptist thought we seek to apply them in a manner that respects both the individuality of the person and the insight available from one another. We seek to be engaged with the world through practicing Kingdom values in the world.”

The vision statement of this new congregation then moves to a statement of the church’s mission. “We seek to enact the Kingdom preached by Jesus in [Midtown], through: demonstrating our love of God by loving all people; acting justly and living peaceable lives of nonviolence; practicing reconciliation and demonstrating humility;
[and] inviting others to join us in our life of discipleship.” Darrell summarizes all of this by describing his worldview, “I see a God who changes people and seeks to bring us into an alignment with truth.” Other members of the congregation offered descriptive statements about the emerging nature of this church. “I think one [of our common commitments] is that we are tolerant of everybody’s place.” Another member said, “I think one of the things we hold in common is a . . . culture of social justice and other kinds of things that go with that that are kind of ‘granola’ community. So, you know, social justice and environmental issues.” One member identified an aspect of the vision that he does not see present yet but hopes to see in the future. The group hasn’t “gone out to do a lot of service work to the community. I think that will come, as we tackle some of the other things in the group.”

Community Mennonite Church is being planted in Midtown, a city in the upper Midwest, of 61,000 people that is home to a large university. When asked to describe the demographics of the city, the members demonstrated a modest self-consciousness about how their city might be perceived by others. One member summed it up in three words that she might have hoped contrasted with her own sense of identity, “White, conservative, America.” Another member who teaches at the local university offered a slightly different perspective, “If you go down to the university, I don’t think you have as much of a big ‘C’ conservative there. In fact, some of my students crab at me about that. I had one who said, ‘You’re all just liberals yadda, yadda,’ when we went to war with Iraq and he just didn’t want to hear it.” Another member who works as a manager in a large manufacturing business offered this perspective, “In [Midtown] itself, it’s not so much manufacturing as the eastern part of the state. They’re more professional [here], if you
will, because there are two large hospital systems [in town]. [Midtown] is the county seat so there are quite a few professional positions.” This person feels that the city officials have been intentional in shaping the city’s workforce. “The industry that they’ve [city planners] brought in tends to be a more green, environmentally friendly type of industry than your traditional manufacturing might be. There is also a lot of retail-oriented [business] in Midtown as well.” Another aspect of the context in which this church is being planted is that, as a small city, “it doesn’t take long to be in the country. There is still a lot of open farmland and rural [expanse].”

When asked about the religious context of the area, the members were quick to characterize it in stereotypical Upper Midwestern terms. One member said, “Lutheran, Lutheran, Lutheran . . . Catholic, Catholic, Catholic . . . Upper Midwestern demographics.” Another member added, “Throw in a few UCC churches and a couple of Presbyterian, but not much else.” When asked about evangelical or contemporary mega-churches, one of the participants said, “Well, the evangelicals . . . the Lutherans are the Evangelical Lutherans.” Karen offered that “there are few non-denominational Christian evangelical churches.” These, however, were not characterized by the group as mega-churches but “corporate churches.” Darrell said, “They’re General Baptist and they work with that [corporate] model.” One aspect of the religious context in which this church is being planted creates confusion for Community Mennonite Church in the community. “There’s also some Old Order, Conservative Mennonites not too far away. So when we tell people ‘Mennonite’ they’re like, ‘Wait, where’s your covering?’ or, ‘Are you related to the Weavers at Fall Creek?’” (The Weavers at Fall Creek are known regionally for the store that they own and operate that specializes in conservative Mennonite wares.)
One other unique characteristic of the religious context shapes the identity of Community Mennonite Church. The meeting place for this new congregation is the only synagogue in town. When approached about using this space, Temple Sholom “not only agreed, but was excited to rent their worship space to us for Sunday worship.” Darrell reflects on the hospitality of Temple Sholom and the possibility of future interfaith dialogue. “They see the Mennonite experience as similar to their own Jewish experience in that we are both attempting to live lives of peculiar faithfulness within a culture in which we are [often] invisible minorities. They seem excited to teach us how to keep our Sunday fellowship time kosher and willing to provide space and a key.” Another member of Community reflects on this unique relationship, “We’re attending on a Sunday when other people are not, because of their faith.”

Community Mennonite Church has developed a strong internal culture in the short time it has existed. This group strives for authenticity in its worship expressions and a semi-formal atmosphere that is not terribly concerned about strategic approaches to church growth. Darrell said, “We’re trying to grow this, and it grows ‘as it grows.’” Another member said, “From my perspective, it’s a semi-formal group. It still has some formality to it, due to the structure and repetition that we have each time we meet. But as you can see, we’re pretty mellow overall. So if [someone] has an idea that he wants to do something, we say, ‘Hey, let’s follow through.’” A significant aspect shaping the culture of this congregation is that the vision originated with two couples who had become Mennonites in adulthood. Yet, a number of people who have joined the church are people who have a generations-long Mennonite heritage and happened to relocate to the area. As the focus of the interview moved toward a discussion of the nature of this
church, several themes began to emerge. The themes included positive missional reflection, anti-missional reflection, the role of the church planter in developing common understanding among the members, a post-Christendom worldview, and challenges to progress.

Positive Missional Reflection

The participants in the interview did not speak explicitly of a missional ecclesiology. Nevertheless key missional understandings are foundational to this church’s self-understanding. The group reflected a missional ecclesiology in four categories: the preceding mission of God, attention to the intersection of contextual need and the gifts present within the congregation, reaction to modern models of church planting, and the church as self-differentiated from, yet engaged with, the world.

Darrell characterized his understanding of God’s mission preceding human initiative. Rather than having a pre-determined plan that “mapped” the church’s initiative for growth, Darrell hopes for something more organic and in rhythm with God who is already in motion. “I think there was a relief that [rather than having a goal] that in 18 months we should be at ‘X’ amount and at ‘Y’ point . . . [instead there is this vision] of letting this grow naturally, letting this be what it is today, it is church. We are where we are today and that’s okay. God uses small churches to do his work, he uses poor people to do his work, he uses big churches to do his work.”

Related to the understanding of God’s preceding mission shapes a value in the congregation for finding where the needs in their context intersect with the gifts God has given the members of this church. One member reflected on what she hopes to experience as a member of this church: “For me, it’s being a part of a community and
providing the community with what it is the community needs, whether the community is a poor community and they need help building homes, you know, the church would participate in that, so whatever it is . . . the outreach is to the community to meet what it is that the community needs.” Another member reflects on the culture of the church that seems to invite members to offer the gifts that come most naturally. “Because we’re a small group, we kind of elect to do the things we like to do. We have the liberty because we are a small group, so if [someone has] an interest in providing snacks every week because [they] like to provide snacks . . . nobody’s going to object to it.” There is a strong value for comfort within the group and as the participants talked about sharing their gifts, it caused one member to share a concern that the comfort level that is shared within the group could threaten to turn offering gifts to their context into primarily offering their gifts to one another. “I think we tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive [and] as much as we want to be inclusive, we aren’t. And you know, probably as demonstrated by a lot of things that have been said here tonight, we like this church as we’re comfortable here. You know, maybe you need to get a little uncomfortable.”

The understanding of a missional ecclesiology became more clear as the interview surfaced the group’s reaction to modern church-planting models. One member reflecting on the prospect of becoming involved with a new church said it this way, “I thought, oh (long sigh) church plant, do I want to? Because I’ve experienced that, you know, we’ve got to get the numbers in the door and everybody needs to do this and that and the other thing. This model feels more comfortable.” This member’s husband concurred, “Yeah, we’re familiar with a church that has to be numbers driven because of financial reasons. And they feel forced to have the followers in order to pay the bills, because of some
expansion projects that were taken on without considering the amount of revenue that would be needed to support that. And so, you know, we’re not at that point. And I guess from a business standpoint, when you take on additional finances, then you feel like you have to have more people to support those things. And that’s when it feels like you’re really trying to force people in the door just to accommodate your financial condition.” Another member demonstrated her reaction to modern church-planting models, “I don’t want to do a correct model, I guess. I like and I’m comfortable with this and I feel like it’s the only thing I can do right now.”

Darrell, the pastor, said, “I went to seminary, which is a [Baptist] seminary.” Their model of church planting “does the big launch. The mega-churches in the [nearby metropolitan area], most of them are Baptist General Conference. So I sat through those classes and I ‘know’ how to do it that way and I was never really comfortable with it.” When asked what made him uncomfortable, Darrell said, “I wasn’t comfortable with it because it seemed very professional and programmed . . . too, too, almost marketing . . . too sterile . . . too . . . large and ‘corporate,’ I guess for lack of a better word.” I want to reverse that. I want to take the [Scripture] texts that I find so radical and in some ways disturbing and lay that out there as best as I can for people to digest it the best way that they can.” Darrell’s wife Karen added, “I’ve got a friend who’s a church planter and they just had their ‘launch’ Sunday and they’ve been meeting and planning, getting everything organized and recruiting, and meeting for over a year. And they just launched two weeks ago. That’s not who we are.” In reflecting on modern church models, an underlying cynicism was present among the group characterized by one member who said with sarcasm, “We haven’t read The Purpose Driven Church yet.”
The clearest expression of a missional ecclesiology that is foundational to this emerging church is in a self-understanding of the church as differentiated from society yet engaged with the world. Darrell described the church as a distinct group of people. “Those of us who are baptized have made a commitment to follow Jesus in discipleship, recognize his authority. Those in the world or in the government don’t and so we seek to model our lives on Jesus and follow the New Testament, and the Bible is authoritative. “‘They’ [governments] don’t. I preached a sermon at seminary two months after September 11 on love of enemy and what would it mean to love Osama bin Laden. What does that mean? I can’t believe locking [him] in a cage for sixty years, I don’t know, doesn’t sound overly loving.” His seminary classmates were mystified by this message. Darrell sees the church’s distinctiveness in being comfortable with itself. “I see a lot of things that are done that seem to come out of a sense of insecurity with the self, insecurity with being the church, and so there are over-reactions one way or another.” In contrast, Darrell hopes to be a part of a church that is “comfortable in its own skin . . . not feeling the need to show that it’s modern or hip . . . because they’re coming from some sort of insecurity . . . that type of confidence that comes from being yourself and not needing to be against anything.”

Darrell recently preached a sermon series on Jonah that challenged his childhood understandings. In looking at the story through a missional lens, Darrell realized that “God called Jonah to preach to his national enemies, the superpower to the North. He faced nationalism, you know, I would say he was a good patriot when he . . . tried to run away to Tarshish. That’s extremely relevant out of something, until I sat down and read it, mostly thought about as a children’s story with a big fish.”
While he affirms witnessing to the state, Darrell is very uncomfortable with modern church approaches to witness when the witness of the church adopts its methods from coercive forms of power. Darrell gives an example of a formative experience that oriented him toward methods that are more aligned with the church’s message. This is at the heart of his understanding of a missional church that is self-differentiated from, yet engaged with, society. “As I sat back in the eighties and early nineties, and watching the way abortion was fought by some groups. In my mind, that was in a lot of ways crossing the line by calling people terrible names and fire-bombing buildings. You know, when you set up a clinic for women who are in crisis, who are in a really tough spot, you can serve them. And maybe you provide an alternative witness, an alternative way, and alternative options, and you serve that woman where she is. In my mind, that type of work does more, you know, ‘saves’ more babies than all the fire-bombing or protests or calling people names or throwing blood or what have you.”

As Darrell talked about his “two-kingdom” convictions during the interview, the group listened intently. Hearing Darrell share engaged the group in a way that suggests that the members of the congregation have not spent a lot of time articulating their vision in an overtly missional frame but would like to. One member said, “It would be good for us to have a whole discussion about this. I’m just thinking if we could have this in Sunday School or something about [how all these ideas contribute to] this whole Mennonite Church as missional church, how do we use some of the traditional things of what it means to be Mennonites and Anabaptist? How does that contribute to the framework of missional church?”
Ante-Missional Reflection

Reflecting on things that brought the members to join in this new church surfaced some anti-missional thinking that is resident among them. Two closely related categories of anti-missional thinking are the allure of replicating past church experiences and a tacit hope for “ecclesiastical tribalism.”

Among members of the group are individuals who have been involved in Mennonite Churches over their lifetime and came to Community seeking to replicate a church experience that paralleled what they have known in the past. One member, a former Lutheran, married to a long-time Mennonite said, “We’ve been looking for a Mennonite Church that was conducive to [my wife’s] desire from her background, and we were not able to find that in the number of places we lived and just coincidentally found Community. And it’s exactly what we were looking for.” Another member said, “That’s one reason why I feel comfortable with this group, because [it’s] so much the way [our last congregation] was, and so when I started participating, it was like [sigh], they’re talking about the things I like talking about.” One member spoke of an immediate affinity with the worship experience, describing it as “a traditional Mennonite format which was so comfortable to come back to. . . . I didn’t know what to expect, but I came in and it felt comfortable, it felt familiar, it felt like home, you know, it was what I grew up with, it was the Scripture reading, and the singing, and the sermon, and the children’s story. It was all there, you know, all the parts.” Another member said, “It felt an awful lot like the church we had come from, a Mennonite Church that we had come from, and the first Sunday we walked in it immediately felt familiar and comfortable.”
Reflecting on starting a church, a member wondered, “It seems like there ought to be more resources out there for people looking for church. We lived [on the other side of the state] for nine years and we kept saying, “You know there really ought to be a Mennonite Church over here. I have a feeling that there were Mennonites there, but I contacted two different conference ministers asking if they had resources or steps we could take to locate Mennonites, I mean we were to the point of, ‘Should we put in a classified ad looking for Mennonites to attend Bible study?’ We didn’t know what to do when we were in a non-Mennonite area.” Listening to one another in the interview caused the group to begin wondering about this tendency toward the familiar and making connections with those who are already Mennonite, an attitude that I call ‘ecclesiastical tribalism.’

The impetus for Mennonites to seek one another out when living in an area where there are no Mennonite Churches is understandable given the strong sense of Mennonite cultural identity that persists in many communities. A group such as “Community” that is made up of a balanced combination of lifelong Mennonites and people new to the Mennonite faith raises interesting questions about the things that contribute to an authentic Mennonite identity. One member reflected on this dynamic, “The Mennonite Weekly Review had an interesting article [asking] how do we still be Mennonite but expand and not lose that Mennonite identity, that says, ‘This is who we are because of who we’ve been for generations?’ How do we make the new, first generation of Mennonites comfortable within that 6 generations of Mennonite institution?” Another long-time Mennonite member pushed the question further, “How do we open up enough for other people to be comfortable. And [my husband] was saying that this group is
enough diverse that maybe we will find that we’ll have a successful church plant here because there’s that bridge between this, you know, hundred-year Mennonite, and yeah, newly, the ‘neo-Mennonite.’” The label ‘neo-Mennonite’ elicited great laughter from the group and all agreed they had coined a new term. It is noteworthy that those in the group who raise the question of how to ‘open’ the group to others are not among the originating members of the church. There is an assumption on the part of lifelong Mennonites that they are demonstrating hospitality to those who may have preceded them in the formation of the congregation but not the tradition.

Developing Common Understanding

The representatives from Community Mennonite Church reflected on the role and function of the church planter in the developing life and mission of the church. These reflections surfaced three categories: the importance of reflecting in and on action, the need for vision transference between church planter and congregations, and advice to those who want to plant churches.

Darrell reflected on his experience as a church planter with humility and forthright clarity. “I’m the accidental seminarian. People ask, ‘Why did you go to seminary?’ I was bored, I was working nights and I was bored; so I started taking classes and after awhile I thought, ‘Well, I guess I better graduate.’ And then we were kind of comfortable in the [large metro area]. So when we moved to [Midtown], I kind of fell into the church-planting thing.” After 2 years as a licensed minister, Darrell is now faced with the prospect of ordination. “As we were discussing [my] ordination last Sunday, I said, ‘I’m here as long as I’m physically able to be here. I’m here until, until at the very least, you can call a fulltime pastor.’ And then I’ll have to decide if I want to be
considered for that fulltime position. I did not grow up wanting to be a pastor, never felt, you know, that’s a big part of who I have to be in order to be comfortable with who I am.” Though Darrell does not believe being a pastor is important to his own identity, neither does he expect to be far from church work in the years ahead. His hope to lead the church to new horizons was evident in this reflection: “By the time I’m laid in the ground, around 85, so in the next fifty years or so, I’d like to see about four or five Anabaptist churches in the area. So I mean, if we’re talking about my vision long term, that would be it. There’s no reason why there shouldn’t be five churches around here.”

Darrell asked an important question of those who would plant churches, “Would you do it even if there would never be a paycheck for you?” Darrell earns his income as a mental health professional working nights in a metro-area hospital. Darrell and his family live on a small farm outside of [Midtown] and offered an agrarian metaphor for his understanding of vocation: “I garden. I don’t make any money gardening. I do it anyway. What type of people do we need doing church planting? It would be those who would just want to do it . . . have a passion for it.” Darrell demonstrated a clear counter-cultural view of seminary education. He says, “I don’t like seeing seminary as some[where] you go to get a professional criteria to do X, Y, or Z. It should be a calling to a certain place and that shouldn’t matter if you’re working five days during the week.” Darrell believes that the quality of a church’s life should be dependent on something other than the pastor’s performance. “You know what? The people you’re worshiping with are going to be okay . . . if you spend a little bit too much time hanging onto the text of your sermon and aren’t able to just free-flow or walk about like you might want to. Everybody understands. Would you do it even if there would never be a paycheck in it for you?”
Darrell believes that separating his role as church planter from his livelihood frees him to be a more effective and authentic leader. “I don’t want to be market-driven. I don’t want to be forced to say something or preach a certain way because that gets the numbers, that’s what the most recent trend is in churches that are bringing people, that’s the newest gimmick that gets them through the door.” Taken from an essay by Eugene Peterson entitled, “The Subversive Spirituality,” Darrell seeks a role as church planter that is “conscious enough . . . to feel the pulse” of the congregation so that, “if I’m a part of that comfortableness, [I] can take a two- or three-year perspective to subversively inoculate against it. There are times when a congregation, in order to grow, just needs a new voice and new leadership and maybe that would be the case. But I would hope I would be aware of it and at least be able to take a two- or three-year period to get to the point where the congregation could make a conscious thought about where they wanted to go in the future. If you want to stay 45 and happy, great, God can use a perpetually 45-member congregation for 100 years. Or maybe they should come out of that and decide to go in a different direction.” Darrell believes that it is critically important to reflect on what is happening in the church as a determiner of his role as church planter and pastor.

Meeting twice each month for worship and socially in between times slows the process of developing a common understanding of the nature of the church among the members. Darrell recalls a recent conversation among church members: “We were talking just last Sunday and I was asked if I had a timeline on where this Community Mennonite Church should be [by] when . . . and we haven’t really sat down with everyone and talked vision.” Darrell elicited peals of laughter from the group by saying, “We’ve kind of put the vision together because we believed we needed something on the
bulletin.” One member responded wryly by saying, “We need to go on a retreat.”

Darrell’s wife Karen guardedly offered, “At home [To Darrell] I don’t know if you want this public, but at home he has said some of this. And I’ve asked him, ‘What happens if we get too big?’ And Dan just [says], ‘Well, I’ll just start another one in [the city next door].’”

Though the group has not spent much time talking about their common understandings about the nature of the church that is being planted, the group demonstrated a lot of trust in Darrell’s leadership and is comfortable with the way Darrell articulates vision for the congregation. Darrell reluctantly admitted that the articulated vision of Community Mennonite Church is his articulation. But another member of the church described the vision statement as a “living document” indicating that the church members do not feel excluded from becoming involved in shaping that vision as they wish. On the other hand, it isn’t clear how much of the comfort level with the current stated vision has to do with the tacit agreements shared among some members about what a Mennonite Church is.

When asked about advice they would give to conference and denominational leaders with regard to church planting, Darrell and members of the church offered two things. One member who works in business management asked, “Do they have a startup committee or a planning committee or even, you know, call 1-800 – so you can contact a person who is a resource for church plants? [Is there] a resource to go to and say, ‘We would like to do this, what are some steps we need to make this a successful startup?’ And it wouldn’t need to be financial . . . just a resource for structure and startup.”

Another member wondered about a role for someone at another level of church to be
thinking about the qualitative way that new churches originate. “Something that pops into
my mind is [to ask], ‘Is that church somehow coming up naturally?’ What I’m hearing is
we’re kind of a natural progression [that] wasn’t forced in any way. These others, were
they being forced to, you know, pick a spot on the map and put a church here? Is there a
difference in how this is coming about?”

A Post-Christendom Worldview

Most participants of Community Mennonite Church described the context in
which this church is being planted in stereotypical terms. At a gathering of church
platers in April 2008, Darrell characterized his context by saying, “We are planting a
church in Christendom.” However, the worldview of Community Mennonite Church
seems to stand in contrast to this characterization of context. Participants in the interview
reflected a growing post-Christendom worldview in two ways: ambivalence toward
modern expressions of church, and the search for belonging.

A newcomer to Community Mennonite Church offered the following insight on
her spiritual pilgrimage. In her reflection one hears a desire for spiritual connection that is
not confined to modern denominational loyalties. “My background and my husband’s . . .
it’s been a trial time for us. . . . We want something for our children but we’re not sure
where we stand, especially my husband. . . . He knows where he stands, but it’s not
wholeheartedly in any church. . . . Oh, I think [of] the Catholic churches in our area . . .
uh, and I haven’t tried them all out for my family . . . but the one I grew up in, because
I’m from here . . . I’ve had some fights with it, you know, I think you have to look for a
church that’s 80-20, and if you’re really disgusted about 80%, then you can’t go there. So
I like parts of the church I grew up in and went to as a teenager and I just haven’t
shopped around to the other ones because I think they’re going to be just less in another area. . . . So it depends what you’re looking for.” This participant also expresses the spiritual quest of post-Christendom society as an individual journey: “This is where I’m from, this is where I am right now, and this is where I hope to be.”

Other participants in the group talk about the failure of modern expressions of church to offer constructive guidance. There is a sense that the spiritual guidance offered by the modern church is characterized by reductionism and is overly simplistic. One member said, “I’m really not comfortable with, you know, [a spirituality reflected by] books called [things like], “Twelve steps to Christian maturity,” well . . . no it was even worse than that, it was like twelve days . . . it wasn’t even twelve steps [laughter]. . . . You know, it was something like that. That makes me feel physically ill, when I see something like that.” Or as another example, the same participant spoke of the “three-point sermon to a great marriage. I’ve known many people who are married for 50 years and, you know, tried a lot of different three steps, so I would say let’s talk about other things, let’s talk about commitment and slogging through together.”

As group members talked about their disillusionment with modern expressions of church, they began to describe what they were looking for from the church. “It’s not so much, uh, how are you, are you doing daily devotions? It’s not that. It’s more, are we living in a way that gives a witness to our beliefs?” The desire has more to do with finding companions for a journey than seeking a vendor of therapeutic services.

Participants at Community Mennonite Church illustrated the trend/anti-trend impulse of postmodern individuals seeking an experience of community that validates their individuality. One member spoke in hope of belonging to a church that is “pretty
laid back. Not a lot of pressure . . . not a lot of expectation to participate if you choose not to. I’ve experienced it as ‘come as you are, be what you are.’” Some participants at Community Mennonite are finding a place of belonging that is starting to feel like home. One member recalled what another member said at a recent gathering: “He commented during the service that when they stepped in the door, it felt like home . . . that it was not a passing phase . . . that it was ‘yes’ this is where they belonged.” But for another member that sense of belonging is still a ways off. “For me, uh, it’s becoming a community, but it’s still not like you’re going home. . . . It’s not ‘going home’ for me yet. . . . When I go to Catholic church, I’m like, ‘Oh, yeah, right . . . this is where, for so long, that feels good.’ But the songs at our church are becoming more a part of who I am. But it can’t happen overnight when you’ve done umpteen years of something else.”

Challenges to Progress

The participants in this interview are unanimous in their desire to let their church grow naturally. They place very few expectations on themselves for a particular rate of growth. The major challenge to progress identified within the group is related to a post-Christendom sense of commitment to organized religion. Most group members confessed to a level of commitment that makes participation less than top priority. One member said, “We visited the first Sunday we lived here but then couldn’t get our act together until last fall to attend.” Another member held back commitment out of fear that becoming involved in a church plant might ask more of her than she could give: “Did we want to be in the forefront or hidden behind? You never know with a church plant if it’s going to be ‘go out and beat the bushes for membership,’ or taking it one step at a time.” A lifelong Mennonite in the group talked about the quandary of growing disillusionment
with her involvement in a mainline Protestant congregation. “We had been plugged into a [Presbyterian Church] but were becoming increasingly disenfranchised there for a variety of reasons that I won’t go into. And I knew the Mennonite Church was meeting in [Midtown], but because we had plugged into the Presbyterian Church, had not really thought about pulling the kids out of a church where they were plugged in, where they were attending Sunday School, where they had friends, [to attend] the Mennonite Church. But [we] decided to at least visit and so we’ve been attending as often as we can make it, which is not every other Sunday. Hope to . . . unfortunately. . . .”

Community Mennonite Church is in the formative stages of becoming a congregation. It is a collection of young adult families with children who embrace a post-Christendom worldview in the midst of a broader religious context that largely reflects Christendom values. The intent to offer an alternative expression of church is one of the most striking aspects of the church. Community Mennonite Church demonstrates a number of missional and anti-missional attributes, most of which remain largely tacit. The church planter reflects deeply on his role as leader and vision developer. Darrell demonstrates a clear reproducing rather than replicating vision for this church. His dream, shared by others in the group, is for Community Mennonite Church to become a hub of multiplying congregations in the area. He recognizes the need to have a more intentional conversation with the congregation about common theological commitments. Members of the church would welcome such conversation and do not feel disempowered by the absence of these conversations. They recognize that there are many commitments that are assumed because of the lifelong Mennonites in the group. It remains to be seen what will happen to the common commitments of the congregation if the lifelong Mennonites
continue to view themselves as “hosting neo-Mennonites” into the Mennonite tradition particularly for “neo-Mennonites” whose theological commitments are overt rather than assumed and whose investment precedes involvement of lifelong Mennonites in this local congregation.

New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church

The Hmong people came to America as refugees following the end of the Vietnam War. Because of their collaboration with the American CIA, they became the targets of persecution following the war. They fled Vietnam and spent many years in refugee camps in Laos and Thailand before being resettled in other countries around the world. Approximately 60,000 Hmong people live in a metropolitan area in the upper Midwest. Many of these people found their way to the area between 1990-1992 because of the state’s refugee-friendly policies. The Hmong people also perceive that the metropolitan area offers better job opportunities than many other places in the U.S.

New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church began in this major metropolitan area in January 2004. Because the group had no building, their first worship service was held in the home of church planter, Foua Lee, with four families present. By April of the same year, the church began renting space from another church. New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church became an official member of the conference in July 2004. In 2007, a celebration was held to mark the church’s transition to an independent, self-supporting church. Worship in this church is conducted in a mixture of two, and sometimes more, languages. Pastor Foua believes it is important for English to be spoken in the worship services in addition to the Hmong language to retain their connection to the youth of the church. By 2007, the worshiping community of New Covenant was made up of 16
families consisting of 87 people. The “tag line” of the church reads, “Together we worship God, seek truth and walk humbly with our God.” Pastor Foua reports that about 70% of the members joined the church as new Christians. About 30% had a Christian background before coming to the church but had stopped attending their former churches.

Leaders in the church suggest that the Hmong people moved to the area because of the economic opportunities it offered. Hmong people prefer to be self-employed as small business owners, a goal many have been able to realize in this urban area. The Hmong culture is made up of only 18 clans. Marriages are often arranged and marrying within one’s clan is not allowed. The culture places a high value on intergenerational support. Upon marrying, couples are expected to move into the home of the husband’s parents. According to Pastor Foua, because the Hmong people began coming to America as refugees just 30 years ago, many of the older generation “have no education, no job, and there is a lot of poverty.”

In 1994, Pastor Foua was living in Fresno, California, and was sent by his church to Hesston College to attend a 2-year pastoral ministry program. Upon completion of that degree, he returned to California and was a pastor in Fresno for 3 years. In 1999, he moved to Colorado to be a pastor for youth in the Hmong Mennonite Church in Denver. In 2003, Foua was asked to move in order to plant churches in the upper Midwest. From the beginning Pastor Foua and those who sent him anticipated the planting of multiple Mennonite churches in the area. Shortly before Foua arrived, the founding leader of the Hmong Mennonite Church in the U.S. approached leaders of the conference with a proposal for the new church plant and suggested ways the conference could be helpful.
Conference leaders created a reference council to provide relational support for this new work.

In order to understand the nature of New Covenant, an interview was conducted at a gathering of the church’s key leaders and a reference council appointed by the conference to provide support and counsel for the fledgling church. A follow-up interview was also conducted with the pastor and another lay leader after the congregation celebrated becoming a self-supporting church. The interviews surfaced a number of themes that spoke to the nature of the church that is being planted. These themes were all nuanced by the centralized role that the church planter plays in the development of a new Hmong congregation. The themes included the church planter’s role in the origination and deployment of a vision, positive missional reflection, the church planter’s role in developing common theological commitments within the church community, and the church planter’s role in developing leadership for ministry. The interviews also surfaced some perceived challenges to progress.

Vision Origination and Deployment

Early in telling the story of New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church, the prominence of the church planter’s role in the development of a new church became apparent. The church planter was appointed by the founding member of the first Hmong Mennonite church in the U.S. in consultation with other influential leaders. The responsibility for the vision of this church lies with the church planter in a centralized way. Yet, the development of shared ownership of the vision requires Pastor Foua to be both relational and strategic.
Foua reflected on how the vision for the new church originated and developed in a way that suggested that this work was his to shape. Members of the Anglo reference council expressed their willingness to trust Foua’s intuition. One member of the reference council said, “I agree with Foua that the vision [primarily falls] on the church planter. . . . I view us as a support agent to connect with conference and hopefully to bridge [the] gap and build community” between the Hmong church and other conference congregations. Another member of the reference council demonstrated humility in his desire to learn from a Hmong leader: “I think success to me in this work is the fact that they’re teaching me. . . . I feel as if I’ve been a believer the majority of my life and I’ve tried to do God’s will and it’s a humbling experience to see new believers bring something to you, that can really impact you, and I needed to be humbled.”

According to Pastor Foua, in Hmong church culture, “only the pastor or church planter is in charge of the goal.” Pastor Foua said, “In my vision, Foua starts this church. I have dreamed to bring Hmong people to come to know God . . . and on my vision for this work, I want to see it growing and making path in this community. It is not what the church name is or who we are, but because of who we worship. Who Jesus Christ is and whose kingdom we are of. This is my vision for planting a church among the Hmong people.”

Foua’s approach to church planting is highly relational and strategic. His ministry is based on making individual contacts. One of the biggest influences in Hmong culture is the traditional religious practices of shamanism. Foua reflected on his early experience of going door to door as an evangelist. In the earlier attempts to plant churches in Fresno and Denver, the strategy of evangelism was to build relationships with individuals and
then attempt to reach the clan leader. Foua said, “This was very difficult. When a family converts to be Christian, the clan leader will convince them to be non-Christian again, so it is very difficult.” In recent years, Pastor Foua’s strategy has been to approach the leader. “But the way we approach the leader first, it is more difficult and takes a lot of time.” Foua has found that when a clan leader converts to Christianity, many of the other clan members will follow.

Positive Missional Reflection

Though he was not very explicit about his understanding of missional ecclesiology, when asked about the role of missional ecclesiology in his work, Foua expressed appreciation for a missional way of framing the church. He suggested that missional ecclesiology is an understanding that provides a useful bridge for common vision among Mennonite leaders across cultures. Foua commented that when he meets with his Anglo Mennonite colleagues for monthly meetings, he shares much in common with the ecclesiology he hears them describe. He is self-conscious that the language barrier that causes him to be slow to speak may make it appear to others that he is not in agreement with what is being described. Aspects of a missional ecclesiology are evident as Foua talks about the church as itself commissioned, the incarnational emphasis of his theology, the importance of allowing context to shape ministry, and the importance of hospitality as a spiritual discipline.

Foua identifies a foundational commitment to the missional understanding of the church as itself sent. The mission posted on the church’s website quotes the Great Commission from Matt 28:18-19: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the
Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you, and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” The church’s mission statement is explicit in its understanding that all of the church has been sent to go and make disciples. “New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church believes that Jesus commissions and commands all Christians. We are called to spread the Gospel of Christ.”

Second, Foua strives to develop an incarnational, or cruciform, ministry within his congregation. Being a missional church “we teach the Gospel, train leaders in the way Jesus came . . . so we have to live a life like Jesus’ teaching.” In speaking to the needs of people, Pastor Foua intends for his church to not only speak good news but for the church to be an expression of good news. This is most evident in Foua’s vision for the church to confront the violence that has been a historic marker of his culture. “My vision [is to lead] this church to [a position of] . . . non-resistance. For example, in [our] history, Hmong live in the country with fighting, they have a war, so when I know Christ, to be Christian, we want everybody to become Christian and live a life peaceful, and love each other, no fighting, no war. To be baptized and be saved . . . and we live in community and loving each other and help each other, carry each other, we have, uh, the way we believe and be a church.”

Third, Foua is very concerned that a strategy for church planting pays careful attention to the missional impulse of contextualization. Foua’s counsel to anyone developing a strategy of church planting is to pay special attention to the ethnic context in which that church is being planted. He believes that the people best equipped to plant a church among a particular ethnic group are those who share that same ethnic heritage. “I
would tell them to find the church planter for any group who would plant church. For example, Vietnamese. So, the church planter should know about Vietnamese culture or Vietnamese language, or should know Vietnamese background. Also, I would advise them, for example, Mexican church planter should be Mexican people with Mexican people. But Mexican cannot plant among Vietnamese. Or Vietnamese cannot plant among Mexican. Or, for example, Hmong church planter knows Hmong culture better, the Hmong language better. Hmong should plant churches among Hmong people.” Pastor Foua hopes to develop a ministry that is highly sensitive to contextual needs.

The fourth aspect of missional ecclesiology is, admittedly, a growing edge for Pastor Foua. One leader of the church characterizes the quality of relationships as a family. “The nature of the church that Pastor Foua has planted . . . feels really close, like a family. And I think that’s how it’s supposed to feel. Everyone knows everyone else personally. If anyone needs anything it’s just a phone call away.” Pastor Foua affirms the strength of this quality but also feels the need to challenge it. “For the congregation, right now, we have fellowship, but next I will change fellowship to hospitality, like visit or go house to house to bring people together. So probably I have to change the ministry [from the past] to the future.” This challenge to move from fellowship to hospitality is an attempt to develop an understanding of a missional ecclesiology within New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church.

Developing Common Understanding

When asked about the common theological commitments of the New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church, Foua wanted to make sure that he was understood, so he wrote the foundational commitments down and passed them out as he answered this
question. Foua described the theological commitments of his church this way, “We hold a covenant, the idea of a religious community based on the New Testament model. The spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and our core beliefs from the Anabaptist tradition. So we believe in the authority of Scripture and the Holy Spirit and salvation and we practice believer’s baptism and we do discipleship and we practice discipline in the church. We practice communion, remembrance of Jesus in the breaking of bread. We believe in nonviolence and we do not swear oaths.”

When asked how Pastor Foua develops common understanding for these theological concepts within his congregation, he cited the importance of his role as teacher in the community. “I have to tell my vision for the church. I will lead this group to the vision we set forth. Everyone has to know the vision. I have to preach or teach the vision every three months to remind them of the vision and tell them to remember the vision where we are.” When asked if he experienced resistance to his theological commitments, Foua said, “Yes, sometimes people have a different idea, different vision, but someone voted against me, but it’s very important for the people who criticize the vision, you have to have some step to step on.” Here Foua was referring to the need to get down to comparing foundational commitments when there are differences of opinion. “We try to find [out] why this person disagrees with my vision, and I have to find out why he criticizes me and try to aim my vision a little bit higher. Yes, we have someone [who] disagrees with my vision, but the way I lead them, I have to try to make them understand.” Foua offered an example of resistance and his willingness to allow latitude in his principles. “I had one family [who] came to church. They decided to be baptized right away. And I think about people who have been baptized (the way we have baptized
people in the past). We have to train (provide instruction prior to baptism) or have a class for [those who want to be baptized], but they decided immediately to convert and be baptized. So this happened to me one time. And it really surprised me, but I baptized them, then I trained, I taught them, I had a class for them afterward.”

Foua also illuminated a key cultural understanding of effective leadership with regard to developing common understanding in the community. “In Hmong culture, to be a good leader, the leader has to be first, and willing to do by action, not by word. People see you do the right way, so they respect you, and so you as leader have to do first. If they see you going the right direction, you have set forth, then they believe you, they follow you, they respect you.” In Foua’s cultural tradition, leadership roles may be conferred, but authority to lead is always earned.

Leadership Development

Given the centrality of the church planter’s role within Hmong culture, one might think there would be a tendency to marginalize the leadership development of others in the group. On the contrary, leadership development is one of the most intentional initiatives of Foua’s leadership. One of the most striking things in the interview was the presence of the lay leaders from New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church. Pastor Foua brought the church council chair, the treasurer, the youth leader, and the secretary. All of these leaders were young professional people under the age of 30. During a planning meeting of the church leaders and reference council, the lay leaders were unselfconscious and deeply engaged in answering the questions of reference council members and explained the strategic operations of the church. When they were unsure of how to respond, they looked to Pastor Foua at the end of the table and he would provide a brief
answer, prompting the young adults to continue. Otherwise Foua remained silent. For the
taped interview, the roles reversed and the lay leaders offered fewer contributions to the
conversation, deferring to Pastor Foua as spokesman for the group. Pastor Foua’s
approach to leadership development appears to be characterized by sharing the leadership
platform, formal training experiences, and developing a worldview of the church as self-
differentiated from the world.

Members of the Anglo reference council spoke enthusiastically about Pastor
Foua’s work in developing leaders in the church. One member of the reference council
observed, “Foua isn’t doing everything like other ministers, [feeling] that they have to do
everything themselves. . . . One of the important things is that he’s working with the
young people, even the teenagers, and getting them involved in the worship service as
well.” Another reference council member continued, “That is something that Foua has
done since the start. . . . He doesn’t set himself up on a pedestal. He works directly with
and supports and encourages his members” to become leaders. One church member said,
“I agree that we constantly involve a lot of activity at church to develop a lot of
leadership for everybody individually, so that is the strength I see for the church.”

In another encounter with the New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church, I was
present for a formal leadership training workshop led by the founding leader of the
Hmong Mennonite Church in the U.S. Fifteen young adults gathered in an unfinished
basement of a home to spend the entire day receiving leadership training. In conversation
during a break, a young woman was asked why she had come. She responded, “Well, I
just decided if I was going to be a leader in this church, I had better learn how to be a
good one so I am here to receive whatever help I can to be a good leader for the church.”
A specific task in leadership development seems to be the cultivation of a worldview that trusts the wisdom of the church more than the wisdom of the world. Pastor Foua said, “We have to know good or bad advice in this work, so questioning where are we getting our advice from? From God, from the Word, or the world or from evil people who are working against God’s work in this world. So . . . we [need to] be very careful about [when] advice [comes] from some people who [are] against God’s work.” Reflecting on the proclivity for violence in Hmong culture, a young adult member said, “Being a leader, there are a lot of people that, you know, would do what they can to take you down . . . give you false advice, would ask a lot of wrong questions to discourage you and just ask questions to bring you down, from teenagers to older people as well. So I think that is one of the greatest threats to discourage you. So I pray to God everyday to be with each and every one of us, especially the leaders.”

Challenges to Progress

The participants in the interview identify a number of signs that the church is developing and gaining in strength. One reference council member said, “You know, starting a new church anywhere, among any group of people is a very difficult task these days, and the fact that we have a congregation of [more than] sixty people in three years is a sign of something positive.” Yet, the leaders of the church and members of the Anglo reference council spent a large part of the time during the interview talking about the things they perceive to be challenges to progress. These challenges were expressed in terms of the cultural pressures, language barrier, finances, and facility.

As stated earlier, because the majority of the Hmong people continue in animist religious practices, clan leaders and families place tremendous pressure on those who
convert to Christianity. This causes many individuals who convert to Christianity to practice their new faith or retain their old practices in covert ways. One young adult leader in the church said, “We have a lot of elders [who] carry old traditions, nonbelievers, so for a new church to have any members you have to break the barrier and ‘make’ them into a believer. So it’s kind of hard for a [Hmong] person to do that. So first you start small and [with] relatives, then you grow from there. Once you convert them to believe 100%, the hard part is to break the barrier to make them a believer. I think that is the hardest part, to convert them.” In a follow-up conversation, this leader wanted to be clear that he was not suggesting that conversion needs to be coerced, only that those who take a step away from traditional religious practices experience tremendous pressure to return and it seems only as they make a complete break from their tradition can they grow in their faith as Christians.

Language barriers pose another challenge to progress. While most young people in Hmong culture are encouraged to learn English as soon and as quickly as possible, many of the community elders do not speak English and rely on their children and grandchildren when navigating the English-speaking world. This language barrier slows down understanding between Pastor Foua and the Anglo reference council members who seek to offer support. One reference council member said after 4 years of working together, “I understand a little bit more each time we meet. Foua and others tell me a little bit about Hmong culture and Hmong community and things that work in the Hmong community. And that is part of catching up, you know, and maybe we were too arrogant going in.” Language barriers also create confusion within the congregation. Pastor Foua said, “Yes, other languages . . . our young generation, they don’t know Hmong language
so I have to say English and Hmong and mix together language. I have to mix languages, English and Hmong, and sometimes Lao and Thai language.”

The language barrier also slows the process of finding effective training materials. Many training materials available to Foua are written only in English. Reading these materials is difficult in itself for Foua, but only after reading the resource can he evaluate whether it is even useful or relevant for his culture. “I read some articles a couple of times that looked [like they would] not fit for Hmong culture, but fit for people of other cultures. If we [read] the wrong one for Hmong people [it] maybe not fit for the Hmong people. I see some things like that.”

Pastor Foua and his leaders identify finances as a challenge to making progress. In traditional Hmong culture, Shamans do not earn their livelihood from their work as spiritual leaders. While Hmong people bring money or animals for religious ceremonies, they do not easily understand the need to provide financial support for the operations of their churches and the salaries of their pastors. “There’s a lack of financial support. In expectation, they believe that we [leaders] are satisfied, so it looks like we don’t [need] financial support for the congregation.” Pastor Foua sees financial issues as a point where Anglo leaders do not understand Hmong experience. “They don’t consider that . . . poverty [is a] problem. In Anglo culture, I see their support [of] the church; they provide financial support to the congregation so they can stand their financial support. I see it a little bit different.”

Finally, members of New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church long for a facility of their own. Since the beginning, the church has rented space from other churches. This has meant that their worship services must be scheduled when the facility is not in use by
the owners. Typically, this has meant that the church gathers for worship in the middle of the afternoon. Real estate in the area is prohibitively expensive and so the prospect of owning their own space feels like a distant hope. Nevertheless, congregational leaders see owning their own building as an important element in their continued growth. “I think definitely having our own building to have more flexibility and to do what you want to do instead of, ‘We’ve got to get out of here.’ We have to rush constantly, every service, to get it over on time before the next group starts their service. So that is the main reason I think if we had our own building, we would have more time to do our preaching and more time to plan, so I think that is a key issue.”

New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church has been in existence for 4 years. This church has been planted by a leader who was appointed by influential Hmong leaders. The church has developed a formal relationship with a regional conference through a cooperative relationship between the church planter and an Anglo reference council. The central role of the church planter shapes the strategy of the church’s development. Pastor Foua sees himself as the primary bearer of the church’s vision. He demonstrated an awareness and appreciation for a missional ecclesiology. Pastor Foua sees the roles of preacher and teacher as the key medium by which common understanding develops within the church. Pastor Foua is deeply committed to the task of leadership development through sharing the leadership platform, formal training experiences, and instilling a worldview of self-differentiation from the world. New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church also faces a number of challenges to progress that include cultural pressures, language barriers, finances, and facility.
Hospitality House

Hospitality House was started in 2004 by Michael and Angie who “gathered a handful of friends together and started a church in [a densely populated neighborhood in a Midwestern metropolitan area].” The church grew to about 50 people, few of whom lived in the neighborhood. “Most of the people lived in the ‘burbs, hung out in the ‘burbs, and only came to the neighborhood for a Sunday gathering.” Out of frustration, Michael and Angie “went back to the drawing board . . . a few times.” Their church’s website says, “Out of the ashes of what once was, a new Hospitality House emerged—a community anchored in the neighborhood and centered on Jesus’ way of peace, hospitality, simplicity, and prayer.”

The neighborhood “is a diverse neighborhood of immigrants, refugees, punks, artists, homeless people, students, activists, and professionals.” The neighborhood exists within 1 square mile. “It is, in fact, the most densely populated square mile between Chicago and Los Angeles, containing close to 9,000 economically diverse residents. More than two thirds of the neighborhood is low-income or below the poverty level. With the exception of a church-sponsored coffee shop, Hospitality House is currently the only church that actively meets in the neighborhood.

The community life of Hospitality House centers around two households in which some of the members choose to live. The synergy of Anabaptist theology Michael was exposed to in seminary with recurrent Anabaptist themes in the new monastic movement caused Michael to seek a relationship with the regional conference of Mennonite Church USA. Michael’s vision to instill an Anabaptist identity is seen in the name of the first community house acquired for the church, “Sattler House,” named after an early
Anabaptist martyr. In June of 2008, Hospitality House was accepted into formal membership in the conference.

Formal affiliation with Mennonite Church USA did not limit the vision of Hospitality House to the relational network of a single denomination. A community house named for an Anabaptist Martyr and a newly acquired community house, Clare House, named in honor of St. Clare of Assisi, is illustrative of a deep hope for the unity of the whole church. Michael further demonstrates this vision for church-wide unity in his coordination of an active ecumenical web community.

Michael continues to be a key leader in the developing network of new monastic communities around the world. Michael’s connection to this network is nurtured through an active web-based ministry. The web-based network is a clearinghouse for “propaganda meant to frustrate and disrupt quaint notions of Jesus (and even quaint notions of the religion he founded). . . . But beyond disruption and subversion, we want to proclaim something much deeper—hope. You can only change things for so long before you need to help create the alternative. . . . We want to captivate [people] with a kingdom vision and explore what it would look like to make that a tangible reality.”

In the tradition of new monasticism, Hospitality House has developed a rule for common life. The preamble of this rule says, “[Hospitality House] is committed to Jesus’ way of peace, simplicity, prayer and hospitality. [Hospitality House] lives to embody Jesus’ presence—particularly in this neighborhood. Members of [Hospitality House] commit themselves to three things: centering their lives on Jesus Christ, being present to the neighborhood, and sharing their lives with one another.”
The members of this community center their lives on Jesus Christ through careful reading of the Gospel in a dialectic that moves from Gospel to life and life to Gospel. The community has published its own breviary to guide the community members in their morning and evening prayers. Hospitality House strives to be present to people on the edges of society. The members also seek to live a life of humility and modesty in contrast to an affluent society. The members of Hospitality House agree to forsake violence in all its forms and instead seek and promote peaceful ways of resolving conflict.

The members of the community are present to the neighborhood by “spending time understanding the cultures of the neighborhood through the intentional building of friendship.” They remember the people of the neighborhood in their daily prayers. They extend hospitality to their neighbors, “sharing what they have with those in need, whether it is a simple meal, clothing, a place to sleep for the night, or . . . friendship.”

Members of Hospitality House build a common life together by seeking “the living and active person of Jesus Christ” in their brothers and sisters. They commit to regular attendance at Hospitality House’s gatherings. Intercessory prayer for one another, material sharing, and the pursuit of reconciliation are all named values intended to guide the deepening of a shared common life. The rhythms that foster common life include a Sunday evening gathering at Clare House to eat together, pray, engage the Scriptures, discuss, and sing. On Wednesday evening, the community gathers at Sattler House for an open meal for the people of the community and their guests. Following the meal, the community prays together. On Saturdays from noon until 4:00 p.m., the community participates in what has come to be known as the “Hospitality Train.” The community loads up their bike trailers with fresh ingredients and high-quality cooking equipment to
feed people good food at a vacant lot in the neighborhood. Occasionally musicians will come and play while the meal is being served. It has become a place where the diverse segments of the neighborhood gather. It has also “caused them to come under the scrutiny of homeland security officials.”

I conducted an interview with Michael, Angie, and two other key leaders of Hospitality House and was invited to share in the community’s Wednesday evening meal with the interview to follow. I approached Sattler House, a modest bungalow set amidst many blocks of similar story-and-a-half homes that appeared to have been built in the 1920s. The yards were clearly sized to use the land to maximum effect. I was welcomed into the house as the table was being set for supper and a group of about 18 people were gathered in the living area talking and laughing easily, waiting for others to arrive. The group was made up of young adults, all under 40 years of age. Four small children were playing among the adults. There were several married couples, but the majority of the group were singles. I was easily struck by their easy and comfortable manner with one another. As they became aware that I had entered the house, several came, one at a time, and welcomed me, asking my name and offering theirs and then returning to the living area conversation. A cooking snafu at Clare House caused one carload of people to delay the meal more than an hour. No one seemed particularly concerned about schedule and so when all the food had arrived, it was set on the table. The food was a healthy array of fresh vegetables and pasta. Following the meal, I met with the key leaders that Michael identified for the interview in a common living space on the second floor.

These leaders of Hospitality House reflected deeply on their experience. In listening to these reflections a number of themes emerged. These themes include positive
missional reflection, reflections on the role of church planter in developing common understanding within the community, a post-Christendom worldview, and challenges to progress.

Positive Missional Reflection

It is clear from the interview with the four church leaders that a missional ecclesiology has been foundational from the church’s beginning. The church’s leaders described a missional ecclesiology in five categories: the preceding mission of God, hospitality, reactions to modern church understanding, the church as self-differentiated from, but engaged with the world, and a desire for incarnational ministry.

The leaders of Hospitality House spoke directly to an understanding of God’s mission preceding human initiative. Angie stated that the name for the church was chosen because they “really wanted to see where God was at work in the neighborhood” when they first moved there. Angie went on to say, “None of the people who were involved in the planning . . . had any real background in that neighborhood, so we really wanted to see where God as at work, kind of submit ourselves to the neighborhood and that is what we’ve tried to do in various ways over the course of our existence.” This attention to God’s preceding mission resulted in the church’s decision to dovetail with existing initiatives in the community. Angie said, “So instead of starting with an ESL [English as a Second Language] course or program, we volunteered at one and now I teach ESL at one of the programs locally. Instead of starting our own [bike] cooperative, John works on bikes and builds bikes at an existing bike cooperative.” Church leaders spoke of trying to learn from the neighborhood and then asking God to show them where God is working and where God wants them to get involved.
The leaders of Hospitality House spoke often of hospitality as a foundational core value that shapes the ministry of their congregation. Carla said, “One of the things that really defined the church is hospitality.” Another leader said, “One of the main things that identifies our community is hospitality, so we try to just have an invitational attitude. People may need a place to stay for transitional housing or a place to stay for the night . . . but [we also want to include] people that we’ve known for only a day or two or that a friend of ours might recommend.” It is hard to grasp the lengths to which hospitality is extended by this group. A young man, newly released from prison and in need of transitional housing, occupied the main level bedroom and was present at the Wednesday evening meal. One leader said, “We try to always have an open room.” Hospitality offered at table fellowship is also extended to the neighborhood. Michael offered, “We have two weekly meals, one in our home and one outside, so that even the one outside is not trying to feed the homeless people, or something like that. It’s trying to build community, just trying to have a meal for everybody so that everybody that’s around on the sidewalk walking past would feel welcome to come and stay and talk and just participate.” Hospitality House members intentionally serve the meal with crockery table service and silverware so that those who come to eat the meal will stay and fellowship rather than walking away with disposable plates and utensils.

Church planters, Michael and Angie, tie the ideas of God’s preceding mission and hospitality together as a single issue. Hospitality for this church is not only something offered but also something received. When asked for advice that he might give someone wanting to plant a church, Michael said, “Before you plant a church . . . you need to submit to the neighborhood for awhile first. So ideally, someone should just work and
live and hang out in the neighborhood for at least a year before they even start doing anything tangible as far as ministry . . . so they are really . . . understanding where they are.” Michael prefers this approach to what has been traditionally termed “urban ministry.” Michael describes the traditional approach to urban ministry as the White man’s burden” where people say, “‘We’re all well-educated White people going into a brown neighborhood and saving them all. There’s so many problems with that.’” Michael and Angie speak of hospitality in terms of receiving the hospitality of their context as a way of earning the trust of their neighborhood. After 4 years living in the neighborhood, Michael said, “I think we’re still earning.”

The clarity of vision for a missional ecclesiology among the leaders of Hospitality House is also evidenced by their reactions against modern church patterns that limit the common life of many modern worshiping communities to Sunday morning worship and mid-week programming. John said, “We’ve tried to build something that works outside the boundaries of just one weekly gathering. Church for us isn’t contained in the walls of one single structure.” One gets the sense of a more organic understanding of what church is and how it happens. John continued, “Anytime any of us are getting together, even if it’s as simple as over coffee at the local coffee shop, we’re together. We try to be really commonly focused on community things. Then, you know, church is what happens whenever we’re together, any of us. So we try to include or bring that idea of the church into all areas of our life rather than compartmentalizing events and that sort of thing.”

Michael continued in this line by identifying that results are a secondary concern to attention given to the quality of their common life. Results are often understood only in
retrospect: “I stop and look at what most churches do in general even if they have a lot of resources . . . and then [I] think, ‘Well it’s just a handful of us,’ it’s really amazing.”

While the leaders of Hospitality House root their missional ecclesiology in God’s preceding mission and being received by and engaged with the community, the identity of their church is self-differentiated from mainstream society. Michael said, “I like to think we’ve created a culture where we look at some things, especially what Jesus said, and not let ourselves get off the hook about what we’re supposed to do about it, but always keep those awkward challenging things of Jesus in front of us and then let our life together be a way of always grappling with this to figure out how to live them together.” Michael sees this pursuit as a contrast to mainstream society. “Part of this process is [giving ourselves] permission to be really awkward.” In addition to being seen as awkward, Michael hopes that his community will shun a “high production value” so there is room “to take risks and fail and be awkward.” John suggested that while the church is engaged with the neighborhood, the call of the church is from one kind of lifestyle to another, “Wherever the starting point, we’re always trying to invite each other into the community and the community rhythms.” Angie hopes that Hospitality House will increasingly reflect the faces of their neighborhood and that people will “put up their own houses to use for this purpose.” Although this is the vision, Angie is realistic about the challenges of relating to a large immigrant population in the neighborhood. “In large part, the immigrant population is transitional, and very likely, as they can, they will be moving to other parts of the city or other parts of the state or nation. But it would be nice to be able to have our hospitality include more of the span of the neighborhood population.”
A final commitment to missional ecclesiology is related to the issue of incarnational ministry. Though the leaders identify the explicit value of hospitality, they have also been on a steep learning curve to understand how that value is embodied. Carla, a native of Peru, was most confessional in this struggle: “My heart wants to do what God wants me to do and I want to bring hospitality and I want to share with people. . . .” Yet Carla related a critical incident that challenged her resolve: “As a mom, I remember back one or two years ago, we had our first son, Mateo, and we lived in this house and we were opening the house for people that would need a place to stay whether we would know them or not. And I got really scared. I got a baby, what’s going to happen?” The leaders reflected openly about that experience and how they processed it. The incident involved a homeless man who had gotten kicked out of his treatment program and he had “done it in a way that was not trustworthy and so it was a question, ‘How much can we trust this guy we kind of know, but do we really?’” Upon being turned away, the man became drunk and disorderly to the point that he was taken to jail for the night. Michael refers to this as “the first really risky hospitality event,” and it made them “question how do we actually do this . . . how do we do it in a safe way?”

This event was a painful learning experience for the community. Michael said, “I know you guys [John and Carla] talked about, ‘Do we even fit here?’ That was also a time when I felt like throwing it in. But it was hard to be mad about it, because . . . who else do I know, what other mom with children do I know, that’s going to put up with strangers in the house?” Michael’s leadership style insisted that the group make the decision together, because “what’s the point of adopting someone into the family if you
can’t respect the family that they’re being adopted into. So everybody had to agree. And so to me, that was a moment where . . . hospitality could [no longer] be abstract.”

Though John and Carla ultimately decided to move into an apartment in a neighborhood cooperative, the result of the discernment process confirmed her commitment to the vision of Hospitality House: “The vision that Hospitality House has, is the same vision that John and I have. I think that God put the plan in our lives that we want to do this, we want to be family for people that need family. Whether we know them or not. Whether they seem reliable, whether they seem to be fine or not.” Reflecting on this experience, John said, “I think that created some healthy opportunities because the house can be a house of hospitality now and we can remain involved . . . both as individuals and also as a collective community while keeping all these boundaries that are appropriate for all of our lives and the church.” Michael concurred that this event was formative: “Now we’re at a better place, so we have things differentiated. John and Carla are involved. Maybe not [in] housing, but they are involved in the hospitality process. Everyone can have a different part in the process and not everyone has to have the same role. That’s a hard thing to learn. And we had to figure it out together. And how do kids affect that? What level of the [community] house does John really have? All sorts of things had to be figured out together.”

Having resolved the issue of hospitality at one level, Michael anticipates further struggles on the horizon as the community strives to become more incarnational in ministry. There are many systemic pressures on the stability of the neighborhood. Michael envisions that there may be a role for the community to play in confronting the powers of institutional planners who want to deconstruct the neighborhood and disburse
the immigrant population as a “political” answer to the Somali youth violence that abounds in the neighborhood. “Once we start talking about protest and people getting arrested . . . people are going to get uncomfortable. . . . John and Jared got picked up for dumpster diving and there’s this family in the community that are older and they commute [from the suburbs] and the father of the family is upset a little bit.”

Developing Common Understanding

During the interview, the leaders of Hospitality House reflected on the role and function of the church planter in the experience of this church. These reflections surfaced three categories: the ability to reflect honestly and humbly on experience, the role of the church planter in fostering common theological commitments within the community, and the way common understanding develops in the community of the church’s mission.

The leaders of Hospitality House agree that Michael is the church planter, founder and originator of vision for Hospitality House. However Michael demonstrates a self-effacing leadership style that is confessional and humble. He reflects deeply on his experience. Reviewing initial attempts to start the church, Michael said, “We were trying to just gather some people for a weekly gathering. . . . And we put that idea to death and really made it about relationship and discipleship and living a way of life together. We got really small really fast. It’s only been in the last two years that we started having some consistency and were able to build.”

There have been times when Michael has thought about quitting. “Yeah, the big one was when we . . . were using this as a community house and we had a number of people living with us that were helpers and a number of people living with us that were in need of hospitality so they took relational resources. And for some reason, not sure, I
can’t remember who it was, but we had a number of people all leave at once except for the needy people and Angie and I almost ‘fried out’.” Michael also recalls an episode that brought him closest to quitting. “This sounds boastful, but I was at this place where I was wondering if I had any limits because I’d never experienced them before. And I was finishing seminary, teaching a course at the seminary, throwing a conference on consumerism, coming on staff with Intervarsity, all at the same time. And I was driving and all of a sudden I went hysterical, which was an anti-stress response because I was pushing myself. So I had to get home, I had to get home. I just basically speed-walked home which was two miles without even getting tired because I had all this energy that needed to get burned off.”

Having endured these times of hardship, Michael is now optimistic about the future of Hospitality House. “Now we’re at a point where we have enough people, like I could finally say that if I got shot by an assassin [chuckles] Hospitality House might survive, which has only been in the last few months that I could say that.” When asked to describe what success looks like for Hospitality House, Michael said, “To me . . . when I’m twenty years older and looking at what we’ve done, I’d like to see a number of communities around the country or wherever that have people who were part of our community and learned to do community from Hospitality House.” The hope for deploying this vision for church is structured into the fabric of Hospitality House’s organization. The church maintains open spaces for short-term and full apprentices to join fully into the community’s life for 3 to 9 months as a learning experience.

Michael carefully articulates the theological commitments that are important to him and to which he is calling the church. “One of the things in our community is we
don’t divide a line between ethics and theology. So simplicity, peacemaking, prayer and hospitality are shared commitments that really shape how we see the Gospel.” While it was easy to list these commitments, Michael is clear to anchor them all. “And underneath all that, the bullet point would be, a very Christ-centered ethic as a theological commitment.” As an example of anchoring theology in practice, Michael gave the example of “peacemaking not only as a theological category, but . . . a shared theological commitment. The fact that Christ is actually present in the community and so that any given point the posture should be discerning what God is doing in our midst is like this thing that we practice . . . everything in Scripture has to be discerned in light of Christ’s presence.” John followed up by saying, “It also has to do with the fact that we try not to see doing some sort of service that’s abstract from Christ, but instead, we’re actually trying to live with Jesus, with him, because we believe that Jesus is creating these things, and doing these things, and his kingdom exists, and this is what it looks like. We’re trying to live that, we’re not trying to just go off and do our own thing because of some sort of belief.” Angie agreed with Michael and John as they talked about the common theological commitments of the church, but she added another dimension that brings further clarity to the commitments of Hospitality House. She attributes Michael’s web writings as an important way that many people become aware of Hospitality House. So, “people that come really understand . . . are almost able to have the vision before they come here, as they read on the internet some of the writing and the rule of faith.”

It would be easy to believe that a charismatic and articulate leader can attract a group of followers who expect the leader to be the primary bearer of the vision. Leaders at Hospitality House have worked hard to develop common understanding and ownership
for the community’s mission among all of the members. Michael suggested that the central leadership challenge for him is “figuring out how to basically be able to hand things off, even if they could be done better if I just did them myself.” John put it in these terms, “We try to foster a communal discernment of our things so most everyone is involved in discussing [and discerning] issues.” For John the evolution of the vision for Hospitality House has paralleled the evolution of the community’s own development. “Because we’ve gone four years of an intensifying vision and an intensifying common way of life, and centering things around that, I think we’ve just kind of cultivated this culture [where] to the extent that you’re invested in Hospitality House, your life is invested and committed to it.” Michael emphasizes the importance of the clear articulation of the community’s rule as people come to explore the church: “The nice thing is that we have a standard [articulated] that we’re calling people toward. So if people don’t engage as much as somebody else, it’s still the same standard we’re working toward, so it’s still the same rallying point.”

Another aspect that contributes to the development of common understanding of the church’s vision is that those who join Hospitality House may be a self-selecting population. Angie reflected on this by saying, “There have been people added to the community who were, idea-wise and vision-wise, on the same page and aware of Hospitality House for awhile and so they’ve come. It’s totally different than having people just come and check us out and have their own hopes about what we’d be like. Usually [they’re] disappointed because it wasn’t whatever they . . . had in mind.” Michael continued by describing the kind of people who come to Hospitality House. “People are going to come for one of two reasons. They’re either going to like the ideas and they’re
going to get involved and commit to a place. Or, they’re people that are already in the neighborhood and love the neighborhood and basically [we try] to evangelize them to what we’re about.” Because the leaders are inviting people to a rule of life, which is a higher standard than most churches have for attendance, people “have to buy into a vision [to the point] that they are invested in it and they can’t just be skimming off someone else’s vision.” This understanding shapes Michael’s view of his own leadership: “What that creates for me is just the task of being like the older brother who helps people live consistently according to the vision as much as they can.” This results in an ever-growing common vision “to the extent that people are able to do that [follow the Rule] they become co-bearers of the vision.”

A Post-Christendom Worldview

As the leaders of Hospitality House shared their story, it became apparent that the model of church they are striving for reflects a post-Christendom worldview. This surfaced in three ways: the aforementioned differentiation form the world, responding to a societal search for belonging, and an ambivalence toward modern and programmatic expressions of church.

Hospitality House is an attempt to do something different and be an alternative form of church. In their embrace of a missional ecclesiology, they express reactive attitudes toward modern and programmatic expressions of church. “For most of the time we embraced this idea of not being defined by certain events and not having our identity being defined by things like building or an event or very finite things.” Michael pointed to an 80/20 principle of church involvement: “If you had 100 people and 90% would kind of attend and 20% would do stuff; we didn’t want that. And basically we said, ‘How can
we just build a church with the 20%?” Angie brought this idea back to the concept of God’s preceding mission that is “so much less a programmatic type of thing where we start something and plan it . . . and much more trying to participate in what’s already going on and see what needs to be added, maybe down the road.”

The leaders of Hospitality House are very aware of the fragmentation of American society that is torn between individualism and a deep hunger for belonging. Angie said, “Most people live lives that are so spread out and do their shopping all over and their friends are all over and their life is just very spread out. And so we are trying to encourage people to be involved here and cut out some of that and focus more here.” It was noted that committing to life in one place cuts against the grain of American individualism. Angie spoke of people who couldn’t share the passion for that neighborhood. Nevertheless Hospitality House leaders open-handedly “encouraged them to focus closer to home, wherever they were.”

As has been seen in earlier reflections, the leaders of Hospitality House characterize deep hunger for community to a longing for family. An exchange between Michael and John illustrates this: “There’s lots of people involved that we got to know through the neighborhood that in some way or another think of us as their community.” John added, “Or family.” Michael concluded, “Yeah, family, which to me is more. Even though it means that they are less likely to attend but more likely to show up at your house in the middle of the night and want something. So that’s the trade off. More like a family than an institution.”

Reflecting on this idea of redefining family as family of faith, Michael said, “The goal should be to live out your faith with a family of people who live out your faith with
you and that you’re hospitable, and you have a . . . porous boundary of who can be family. That’s different than . . . going into the city, into the bad neighborhood and save it . . . and saving those people from the thing they’ve created for themselves.”

Challenges to Progress

Throughout the interview the leaders of Hospitality House highlighted perceived challenges to their progress. These challenges included contextual complexities, ambivalent commitments, and finances.

For all of the cultural diversity of the neighborhood, it is not an easy place to do ministry. Michael jokes that “God told us the wrong neighborhood because [this] would be easier in almost any other neighborhood in the entire [metro area]. I think the part of it that was my decision—and not God’s—just wanted to pick the hardest neighborhood possible to plant a church.” Cost of housing makes it difficult for people to think of becoming permanent residents and it makes it hard for the church to acquire more community housing. “In this neighborhood . . . the housing is so expensive because there’s so many students. What isn’t run by the professional management group for a number of large housing cooperatives, is divvied up into duplexes or triplexes” and that makes housing pricier. The neighborhood is home to a series of large, high-rise, cooperative housing projects. Michael spoke to the complexity that such a concentration of cooperative housing poses. “John and Carla live in cooperative housing. You have to meet requirements to live there so you couldn’t have a community house. This makes it hard for us to be an intentional community.” The cost of housing has been a factor when the “community almost collapsed down to just the five of us and the kids with a few people that were kind of a little bit involved.”
Another challenge to progress involves ambivalence in commitment when prospective members are confronted with the hard realities of this kind of ministry. Michael reflected on his early naiveté: “I thought I heard so many people talk about the ideal and we decided to live this ideal. It’s not perfect, but most of the people around think it’s a big deal. There’s just a number of people that can talk a really big talk about the ideal and say they’d jump at the chance to live that way. But really when you actually get down to it . . . they say, ‘No, I’d rather just not even try . . . but good for you for trying.’”

Michael also reflected on some frustration at the lack of impact other leaders in the new monastic movement have had in interpreting this way of life. “You know, I would have thought people like Shane Claiborne would have made our job easier but it’s almost made it harder. They have these naïve expectations of just getting to sit around having deep heartfelt conversations with perfectly chiseled young men playing drums with dreadlocks who have winning smiles. We only have one guy that fits that description and he doesn’t have dreadlocks!”

One of the big surprises for this community is how “incredibly hard it is to raise funds and support what we are doing.” Angie pondered, “People seem so supportive of what we’re doing, but” the financial support doesn’t seem to come through. John shared on Michael’s behalf that the times he’s come closest to quitting resulted from “frustration over how difficult it is to both raise funds and to just get things going and just feeling so many obstacles, feeling like there’s so many obstacles, that it’s just discouraging.”

Thinking about the things that threaten to derail Hospitality House led these leaders into reflecting on the advice they would give others trying to do the same thing
and also to reflect on the current systems for preparing church planters. Michael believes that to be best positioned for this type of church planting, someone should have a “really flexible decent paying job that allows you to do this and the time to get money from it.” John suggests that someone attempting to plant churches should welcome the risk and the learning opportunities that failure provides. “Don’t be afraid to screw up at all, like we’ve just gone through years and years of just realizing that we’re just screwing up left and right. . . . You just can’t be afraid to get your hands dirty.”

Michael also believes that there is much that could be improved in the traditional educational models found in seminaries. “When some people ask me, and they’re around the age of 20 or younger, I tell them, if this is something you want to do, then you shouldn’t take the career ministry route of education which equals a lot of data and not a lot of helpful training. Not to brag on John, but I always feel like if I could bring him to these seminary classes . . . people wouldn’t think he’s not a seminary student and even though he’s not gone to college or gotten any formal training of any sort, he’s been saturated.” Michael said, “You know it’s the practical skills you’ll need. For most seminaries even in their urban ministries [the training] is inadequate because they’re still assuming you’re coming into an existing 200-member congregation that has certain kinds of programmatic approaches to urban ministry.”

So what would the leaders of Hospitality House recommend as a proper training path? Michael suggests that the best training program would include “some kind of vo-tech education for two years and then two more years of some sort of neighborhood development curriculum.” Michael has a high view of the church as theological training ground: “We can handle the theological training here.” This seems to be consistent with
church as conceived by anyone labeled “monastic.” While it is hard to argue with the
effectiveness of the church-based theological training that Hospitality House is able to
do, it is in large part due to Michael’s own ability to be an effective translator of his
formal seminary education to his base community.

As the interview came to a close, Michael’s parting words to me seemed to
symbolize the breadth of all that was shared: “I hope you enjoy your long trip home. I
mean, I’m tired and you look tired. We have a spare bedroom if you want to spend the
night.”

Summary

In this chapter, four cases of church planting are described. In looking across
themes of the individual cases, 10 broad themes were identified. Eight themes were found
in varying degrees in all four cases. These include positive missional reflection, systemic
and strategic confusion, challenges to progress, church planting and the role of
conference, reflection on the role of church planter in developing common understanding
about the nature of the church being planted, common theological commitments for the
church that is being planted, leadership development, cultural and social pressures. The
theme of anti-missional reflection was found in three of the four cases. A Post-
Christendom worldview was present in the two cases in which the membership is
predominantly Anglo. Denominational and conference leader interviews spoke to all 10
of these themes.
CHAPTER VI

CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Introduction

Having presented the data gleaned from denominational, conference leaders, and four cases of church planting, this chapter will present the analysis of this data across the cases. First the four cases of church planting will be summarized. Following this description of the cases, the analysis of the data will be used to answer the four research questions.

The Cases

The four cases of church planting were chosen because they represented all the cases of church planting in one Midwestern regional conference at the time the study began. These cases, renamed for the purposes of this study, involve Iglesia Menonita, a church plant among a Hispanic population in a small university city; Community Mennonite Church, an Anglo church being planted in a small university city; New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church, a church being planted to reach a Hmong population in a major metropolitan city; and Hospitality House, a multi-ethnic intentional community in a major metropolitan city. The visions for all four of these church plants originated outside of any conference or denominational initiative to plant them. In fact, three of the four of these church plants emerged just as the conference had declared a moratorium on the prior model of church planting and before conference leaders were
able to articulate a new strategy for church planting. These churches were born in the crucible of complex social contexts and a denominational system in the midst of arrested organizational change.

The church plant among a Hispanic population, Iglesia Menonita, is being led by a middle-aged couple who had a successful track record of planting two churches in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The husband and wife team are college educated and the husband had received some seminary training prior to entering full-time ministry. These church planters experienced the brunt of the confusion that was created when the conference interrupted its operational model for church planting. The church planters in this case were invited to plant a church by Hispanic leaders of established Mennonite churches. Neither of the inviting pastors were, at the time, involved in conference leadership. Nevertheless the church planters were invited under the assumption that, upon moving to start the new church, the conference would provide financial support for the development of the new congregation. The first indication conference leaders had of the plan to start a new Hispanic congregation was when the new church planters arrived and moved in to live with one of the inviting pastors until “they could get settled” in the community where the church was to be planted. The target community was a small university city with a high cost of living. The church planting couple could not afford housing in the university city and so they settled in a bedroom community of 8,000, thirty miles from the target community. In their former community, the church planters had established congregations some distance from where they lived and so this distance was not perceived by them as a problem. A number of stakeholders who provided support and counsel for their ministry believed that this was a significant
strategic pitfall. Though this process has been underway for almost 5 years, a stable core group has yet to form. This is due, to some extent, to the transience of the Hispanic population in the face of hostile immigration policies applied in the region.

The second case of church planting, Community Mennonite Church, involved an attempt to begin a church in a small city of 61,000 in the upper Midwest that is home to a large university. The church planter is a graduate of an evangelical seminary and adopted a Mennonite theology during his last year in seminary after reading a number of Anabaptist writers. The church planter and his wife joined the first Mennonite church that appeared alphabetically in the telephone book and became active members. Shortly after graduating the couple relocated to a small rural acreage close to the city in which the church is being planted. The vision for this church emerged between two families who were traveling 90 minutes across a state line in order to attend a Mennonite church. Upon sharing their vision to start a new church, they received strong endorsement for their vision and ongoing moral and prayer support from the small Mennonite church they first joined. The church currently consists of approximately 25 people, 12 adults and 13 children. The adults are all under 45 years old. The other founding couple became Mennonites while living in the desert Southwest. They were drawn to the denomination because of the church’s historic peace witness. Two other couples are lifelong Mennonites who have relocated to the city for career reasons. One other family, from Catholic and mainline Protestant backgrounds, is currently exploring a formal relationship with the congregation.

The third case, New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church, involves a ministry to the large Hmong immigrant population in a major metropolitan area in the upper
Midwest. This work began in 2003. The late 1970s and 1980s saw a major migration of Hmong people from refugee camps in Laos and Thailand to the United States. The Hmong people are an ethnic minority group with a strong corporate identity who have lived as resident aliens in Asia for thousands of years (Fadiman, 1997). Since coming to the U.S., first-generation Hmong people have been slow to integrate into mainstream society, preferring to rely on the clan system of their own culture. There are approximately 60,000 Hmong in the metropolitan area. The Hmong culture has internalized a historic tradition of violence in the face of threats to the stability of their community and deeply held animist religious practices. Clan leadership structure and the religious commitment to shamanism continue to be the strongest formative elements within Hmong culture in America.

The first Hmong Mennonite Church in the U.S. was founded in the mid-1980s on the West Coast. The founder of this church developed a proposal that was presented to conference leaders for the development of a new church for Hmong people in this metropolitan area. The appointed leader for the church plant was the brother-in-law of the first Hmong Mennonite leader in the U.S. The church planter is a graduate of the pastoral training program of a Mennonite junior college. The church has an average attendance of about 75 people. The church planter is soft-spoken, the picture of humility, and gifted in empowering young leaders. During the initial years of work, the church planter struggled to gain new members in the face of enormous pressures within the Hmong community against Christian conversion. In recent years, the church planter has concentrated his energies on developing long-term relationships with high level clan leaders because he
has found that when a clan leader becomes a Christian, familial subordinates will soon follow.

The final case, Hospitality House, involves a church planter who is seeking to develop a new church in the “new monastic” model. The church emerged as an intentional community whose life centers on two community houses that a number of members share. Other members live in private homes but are deeply involved in the corporate life of the church. The current membership of the church consists of approximately 30 adults and several small children. Of the four cases, this developing church is the most closely aligned with a missional ecclesiology. The church members commit themselves to a “rule” of living as an alternative society marked by worship, prayer, hospitality, and reconciliation. Like the second case, this church planter became enamored with Anabaptist theology during his seminary education. While being realistic about the possibility that there is a gap between Mennonite theology and Mennonite reality, the church planter sought a fraternal relationship with the Mennonite conference leaders “seeking the wisdom of the lived tradition.” The church planter in this instance is representative of a new generation of church leaders who are disillusioned with Christendom models of church. Though this church has officially become a member of Mennonite Church USA, this church planter works hard at developing a web-based community of like-minded church leaders across the country from many Christian traditions. The church planter also maintains an active web-based magazine that provides a forum for himself and others to publish material to develop new understandings of the church in the face of Christendom’s demise.
Data Analysis

Through the analysis of interviews, documents, and observations, 10 distinct themes surfaced across the cases from the research data. The themes were (a) an underdeveloped missional culture within the denominational system, (b) lack of structural alignment to support a missional ecclesiology within the denominational system, (c) common theological commitments, (d) positive missional reflection, (e) anti-missional reflection, (f) cultural and social pressures, (g) post-Christendom worldview, (h) challenges to progress, (i) the role of the church planter in developing common understanding among key stakeholders, and (j) leadership development.

These themes were then grouped into four broader areas, each speaking to one of the four research questions: (a) cultural and structural issues within the denominational system, (b) theological commitments and missional ecclesiology, (c) contextual pressures with which church planters contend as they seek to plant churches, and (d) the role of the church planter relative to the nature of the church that is being planted. Two themes dealt with cultural and structural issues within the denominational system: an underdeveloped missional culture, and a lack of structural alignment within the denominational system. Three themes dealt with missional ecclesiology and theological issues: positive missional reflection, anti-missional reflection, and common theological commitments. Three themes dealt with contextual pressures with which church planters contend as they seek to plant their churches: cultural and social pressures, post-Christendom worldview, and challenges to progress. Two themes describe the role of church planter relative to the nature of the church that is being planted: the role of church planter in developing common understanding among key stakeholders and leadership development. Each of these themes is developed as a response to the related research question.
Research Question 1—Structural and Organizational Issues

The stated problem in focus for this study is the confusion church planters and their key stakeholders experience at a time when denominational and conference leaders of Mennonite Church USA are struggling to reconcile the discrepancy between a stated mission and current performance. Five years into the creation of this denomination the delegates of the denomination’s general assembly adopted a mission statement which, in part, envisions “developing and nurturing missional congregations of many cultures” (Mennonite Church USA, 2006). Two years later, following a 6-year review process, the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, speaking with “a single and unified voice,” reported to the constituency of the denomination “that our vision and call to engage in God’s purposes in the world is not adequately supported by our present relationships, behaviors and organization” (Houser, 2008, p. 22). The first question posed in this study investigated this discrepancy between stated mission and underperformance. In what ways do the relationships, behaviors, and organization of Mennonite Church USA support or fail to support the development of “missional congregations” within Mennonite Church USA and one Midwestern regional conference? Two subthemes emerged in the interviews with participants that demonstrate the “relationships, behaviors and organization” that do not support developing missional congregations of many cultures. These subthemes are (a) an underdeveloped missional culture within the organization, and (b) inadequate structural alignment of the denomination.

Organizational Culture

Interviews with participants in this study revealed that there are significant structural and organizational issues that do not support the development of missional
congregations of many cultures. The major structural and organizational issues are related to an underdeveloped organizational culture and the lack of organizational structural alignment.

The organizational culture of Mennonite Church USA is not sufficiently developed to carry the freight of planting missional congregations of many cultures. Schein (1985) asserts that even though an organization devises a strategy that makes sense, “they cannot implement those strategies because they require assumptions, values, and ways of working that are too far out of line with the organization’s prior assumptions” (p. 30). This understanding seems to parallel the Executive Board’s pronouncement that the relationships, behaviors, and organization of Mennonite Church USA do not adequately support the denomination’s mission. Placing missional ecclesiology as the centerpiece of the new denomination’s culture represented a significant shift in organizational culture from the organization’s prior assumptions.

The responses from denominational and conference leaders showed that a missional ecclesiology has not become operational at the level of organizational culture because it is too far out of line with the organization’s prior assumptions. Five prior assumptions seem to be disrupting the process of implementing a missional ecclesiology as the foundation for developing missional congregations through the denominational system. First, denominational and conference leaders identify the struggle to make the paradigm shift from the past-century model of “mission as program of the church” to the emerging model of “church in mission” (Ahonen, 2004). Second, denominational and conference leaders believe that the denomination functions with multiple ecclesiologies borrowed from many traditions that are largely tacit, making it difficult to focus strategic
intent. Third, church planting in the past has largely been seen as something that happens as an initiative of an individual who “has a heart for church planting.” Thinking about a denominational or conference strategy for church planting requires something new of the denominational structure and the self-understanding of denominational and conference leaders. Fourth, denominational and conference leaders believe that there is some level of ambivalence toward church planting among the constituents of Mennonite Church USA. This may be due to past experiences of church plants that failed to thrive or a reaction to the past-century model of church planting that seemed intent on colonizing neighborhoods. Fifth, a prevailing assumption from prior models of church planting assumes that new churches will be built by gathering the “lost sons and daughters of Menno” who are living in urban centers. In other words, there is an assumption that Mennonites living in an urban area would prefer to attend a Mennonite church if the option were available to them.

What is more perplexing about the current situation is the lack of planning for developing missional congregations at the levels of structure, strategy, and process. There seems to be a resignation on the part of denominational and conference leaders that a strategy for church planting is really about something or someone else in the system. For example, it is observed that some in the denomination believe that church planting really has to do with individuals “who have a heart for it,” therefore it has little to do with denominational or conference strategy. Ambivalence among constituents of Mennonite Church USA toward the idea of church planting raises the question of whether leaders believe that a denominational strategy for church planting would receive support from the constituency sufficient to justify the investment. Finally, the persistent notion that the
preferred method of church development is to gather Mennonites who have relocated to urban areas seems to be the kind of method that emerges in a strategic vacuum. The members of Community Mennonite Church were most explicit in expecting that someone somewhere in the denominational system is keeping track of where Mennonites move so that they can be invited to participate in the development of a new church. For longtime Mennonites at Community, this seems to be the preferred method for growth. This assumption is neither certain nor missional.

It is understandable that Mennonite Church USA would struggle in making the transition in its organizational culture from the past-century paradigm, “church with a mission,” to a missional paradigm, “church in mission” (Ahonen, 2004). Many denominations are struggling to make this transition. Overcoming the persistence of prior assumptions held over from the “church with a mission” paradigm is due in large part to how influential Western missionary activity was in the past century. There will be natural resistance to developing a new organizational culture that dismantles the way mission is framed, the way mission is assessed, and how congregations at the grassroots understand their role in mission relative to local, conference, and denominational bodies. It is also understandable that, given the power of religious broadcasting and the absence of an established or “favored” national church, American Christianity would become a great melting pot of many ecclesiologies resident among the constituents of any denomination. Because these ecclesiologies are largely tacit, it is normal to expect that these multiple ecclesiologies would be at work in unconscious ways among those who hold them. It is incumbent upon the Executive Leadership to give concerted effort to the clear articulation of a missional ecclesiology within an Anabaptist theological framework.
Denominational and conference leaders of Mennonite Church USA tend to look primarily through the structural and political frames (Bolman & Deal, 1997). They may do well to consider how a missional ecclesiology is affected when the denominational system is viewed through the human resources and symbolic frames.

On the one hand, denominational and conference leaders might look at the system through the human resources frame. Denominational and conference leaders might gain the “nimble and flexible” organization they want by scanning the environment for those who are already doing the work that aligns with the stated mission. This might open new spaces for denominational and conference leaders to develop new forms of partnership that are more effective than traditional “in-house” programmatic structures. This is what Bolman and Deal (1997) refer to as investing in the “contractual fringe” (p. 112). This could result in a better “fit” between the organization and the stated mission than “forcing” the current staff to become competent in areas where they have little or no experience (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 140).

On the other hand, denominational and conference leaders might look at the system through the symbolic frame. The symbolic frame may be a better match for an organization seeking to realize a postmodern paradigm. Using this frame, focusing on metaphor and ritual may open spaces for denominational and conference leaders to communicate the ambiguities of a missional ecclesiology more effectively to constituents who have understood mission in more “instrumental” terms (Bolman & Deal, 1997, pp. 228, 249). In instrumental terms, the question of appropriate strategy is often framed in terms of accountable results. This is a question not well matched to the enterprise of church planting, which has very little that is “cause-and-effect” about it. In the symbolic
frame the question shifts from accounting “results” to “meaning.” This frame shifts the questions from, “What has been accomplished?” to, “What is expressed? What is attracted? and What is legitimized?” (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 249). These questions seem well matched to a missional ecclesiology that is concerned about contextual interface and reciprocating hospitality.

**Structural Issues**

The structure of the denominational system is not adequately aligned to operationalize a missional ecclesiology among denominational and conference leaders relative to developing congregations of many cultures. Mennonite Church USA is in the midst of an evolutionary change. Tushman et al. (1986) describe evolutionary change as a two-stage process. The first stage is intended to be a relatively short period of time in which organizational leaders make large changes in the organization system. This brief period of orientation is followed by a longer period of convergence in which leaders effect smaller changes, intending to align the parts of the system to the broader strategic mission.

While the intent to be missional signaled a period of reorientation, the period of convergence that was intended to follow appears to have stalled, resulting in a lack of structural alignment. Participants in this study identified three issues of structural alignment that impede church planting in Mennonite Church USA. First, denominational, conference, and church-planting leaders agree that there is considerable confusion about how each part of the denomination should contribute to planting new churches. Conference leaders say they are waiting on denominational leaders to set a course for church planting, on the one hand. On the other hand, conference leaders are not sure they
want to be handed a predetermined strategy for planting churches that becomes the assumed model for all conferences. At the same time, denominational leaders observe that there is no orchestrated downward thrust for church planting from the denomination to conferences and/or congregations. This is further underscored by an apparent internal conflict at the denominational level between the denominational mission agency’s domestic ministries division and the denominational executive leadership office. As one mission agency staff member said, “Teams that were developed as part of the mission agency’s [domestic] ministries department have been suspended pending further discussion with Executive Leadership regarding future structural alignment.” While the denomination and conference leaders attempt to determine proper protocol and structural alignment, participants in newly developing churches are confused about whom they should contact for direction and resources. Because of their regional proximity, conference staff members tend to be the point of first contact when the vision for a new church originates and when church planters are seeking direction. Conference leaders believe that they are best positioned to engage church planters and their key stakeholders by connecting them to resources for training and assisting in initial assessment of qualities and skills needed for church planting.

Second, the participants in this study all identify that the denomination and conference structures are not adequately prepared to engage visions for developing churches when these visions emerge from the grassroots. The four cases in this study are all examples of churches that are emerging even as the denomination’s organizational culture and structural alignment are being defined. The Hispanic church plant provides the most stark case of this lack of preparedness on the part of conference leaders. By the
time the conference leaders were aware that a new church was under development, the
church planter had already relocated halfway across the country in order to give
leadership to that endeavor with the full expectation that he would receive financial help
to do so from the regional conference. The new monastic church plant, as a church that
developed outside of Mennonite Church USA, struggled to understand the procedures by
which a developing church formalized its affiliation with the denomination. The church
planter initially interpreted the undefined, two-year process that finally resulted in
membership as the ambivalence of conference leaders toward welcoming a new
congregation. All participants in this study agree that the present method of church
planting has been trial and error or “make-it-up-as-you-go.”

Third, leaders of new churches among ethnic minorities believe that the
denomination and conference are not adequately prepared to provide culturally sensitive
support and resources. There is a lack of culturally appropriate literature in the native
languages of ethnic/minority church leaders. While it is unlikely that some of these
groups represent a critical market to support the publications of such materials in the near
future, the ability of denominational and conference leaders to become effective culture
brokers becomes all the more important. Ethnic/minority church planters and their key
stakeholders agree that there is limited understanding on the part of conference and
denominational leaders with regard to how ethnic/minority congregations attain
sustainability. This lack of preparedness results in a lack of trust, a sense of alienation,
and a lack of sensitivity to the cultural assumptions with which ethnic/minority leaders
necessarily contend within their communities.
If the Mennonite Church USA denominational system is not adequately prepared to meet the challenges of developing missional congregations of many cultures, it is in good company. The early church was not prepared for the Spirit-led witness in the first century either. Jerusalem was not prepared when the report came back of the conversion and baptism of Gentiles such as Cornelius (Acts 11:1-18) or the missionary impact rising out of Antioch in the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). Suddenly the church was faced with a new wave of Gentile converts in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12), Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:13-51), Iconium (Acts 14:1-8), and Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:8-28). Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were prepared to receive non-Jewish converts; the Jewish faith has a long history of welcoming proselytes into their religious community. However, they were not prepared to welcome converts who had no connection, in fact disregard for, the fundamental sign of belonging to the community, the tradition of circumcision (Acts 15:1-21). The Jerusalem community was willing to welcome new Christians into their space so long as the space remained “Jewish” Christian. In order for Jews and Gentiles to merge into a single body, the church needed to practice reciprocating hospitality that created a new space characterized by a select number of centered-set commitments (Murray, 2004). Similarly, Mennonite Church USA leaders struggle to understand how to describe an ecclesiology independent of ethno-cultural symbols. One of the four church-wide priorities is “global connections.” Stronger connections to the global Mennonite community can provide an important platform to expose and correct tendencies toward ecclesiastical tribalism.

The issues of structural alignment at the denominational and conference level are complicated due, in part, to the basic assumptions that were carried into the new
denomination from past paradigms. The lack of a clear path through the period of convergence in change process has resulted in a frustrated system. One of the contributing issues appears to be one of organizational authority. A system where it is not clear who is ultimately responsible for creating systemic alignment seems to indicate that the system is unable to assign authority effectively. This may be due to the cultural predisposition of a dissident denomination that is suspicious of authority. The Mennonite Church was born out of a felt need to protest ecclesial authority. There may be an organizational preference for avoiding the assignment of authority for the creation of systemic alignment. This was seen in one conference leader’s comment, “I think there is something refreshing about each conference wrestling with, ‘How do we plant churches?’ We are kind of on our own, but [I do not] want to be handed a plan.”

The limited capacity within the denominational and conference structures to respond to the needs of racial/ethnic groups also contributes to the underperformance of the denomination. Currently the executive leadership office has a half-time director of inter-cultural relations. One of the denomination’s four church-wide priorities is “anti-racism.” While a number of the denomination’s agencies work at inter-cultural relations in mission, it is hard to imagine that staffing for this priority has been adequately allocated in the current configuration of Executive Leadership. Executive Leadership has indicated that if the growth trends of the denomination continue on their current trajectory, by 2020 half of all denominational members will be Spanish speaking. Recently, denominational leaders have initiated plans to develop literature in Spanish. While this has been well received among Hispanic leaders and members, it has also become an occasion for leaders and members of other racial/ethnic groups to make
stronger appeals for equal treatment. This has direct implications for the way
denominational and conference leaders structure for resource acquisition and allocation.

Overall, it is apparent that the attempt to change the denomination’s
organizational culture and structure has been arrested. Further, the lack of alignment in
basic assumptions, the inability to adapt to internal and external changes, multiple and
often conflicting perceived realities, and a lack of internal integration of sub-systems all
contribute to the denomination’s inability to realize the desired foundational ecclesial
framework. This is at the heart of the Executive Board’s declaration that the
denomination’s mission is not adequately supported by the current relationships,
behavior, and organization. Perhaps this is an evidence of a postmodern understanding
that organizational cultures cannot be controlled and changed by those in charge (Hatch,
1997). Yet, it does not seem helpful to decide that because the culture of an organization
has not experienced change, Mennonite Church USA leadership should not seek
organizational alignment around an ecclesiology that is consistent with the
denomination’s most basic values.

Too many assumptions have not been aligned with the basic assumptions of the
new paradigm. If, in postmodernity, organizational cultures are not to be controlled, it
would seem that fostering productive dialogue that leads to generative learning will
provide the best hope for organizational transformation. “If the organization is
constructed from language” then “creating discourse within organizations offers more
opportunities for organizing and thus for reorganizing—or change” (Hatch, 1997, p. 368).

Hospitality House is a pathfinder for what preparedness for developing missional
congregations might look like. Hospitality House has a very clear sense of missional
identity seeking relevance in context. The church development process was “front-loaded” with clearly articulated, centered-set commitments. The words describing the centered-set commitments are an example of how language is socially constructing the self-understanding of the church as a unified organizational culture. These commitments differentiate the church from the world, yet articulate how it is engaged with the world. Hospitality House leaders have developed an organizational culture that is aligned along the basic assumptions of Missio Dei. There are various portals for entering the church’s life. Persons new to the church community will choose the extent to which they will engage in the church’s shared life while the standard, or “rule,” or “center” to which all in the church are being called is the same for everyone. This model demonstrates how a church can retain a clear sense of identity while giving itself over to reciprocating hospitality. It is possible that this model could be extrapolated to conference and denominational organizational culture and structures.

Overcoming lack of preparedness at denominational and conference levels is not a matter of developing a finely tuned church-planting factory that produces churches in cookie-cutter fashion. It is evident from this study that God is not waiting for the organization to become aligned before birthing new churches. This reflects the first-century pre-Christendom experience. Therefore, to develop missional congregations of many cultures, the denominational system may seek a structural model characterized by “receive-and-release” rather than “cause-and-effect.” Receiving visions for developing churches would begin with a dialogue based on centered-set assumptions undergirding a missional ecclesiology. Where there is congruence in these basic assumptions, the denominational system would reflect the release of that vision to become incarnated in a
way that can be welcomed in its context. This will require more attention to deploying missional understanding throughout the system and trusting that the essence of a missional congregation precedes its form.

Research Question #2–Theological Commitments/Missional Ecclesiology

At the heart of this study is an attempt to understand the nature of the churches that are being planted in one regional conference within Mennonite Church USA. Ecclesiology is the way we describe the nature of the church and, as such, ecclesiology is understood as “the most practical of all theologies” (Ormerod, 2002, p. 10). Because the stated mission of Mennonite Church USA is to nurture and develop missional congregations of many cultures, it is appropriate to examine the theological and ecclesiological commitments present within the developing churches within Mennonite Church USA. The second question in this study asked, “What common theological commitments are present in the churches being planted in one Midwestern regional conference of Mennonite Church USA and how are these developing churches aligned with a missional ecclesiology?” The interviews, documents, and observations gleaned from this study surfaced three subthemes under the broad theme of theological and missional issues: (a) common theological commitments, (b) examples of positive missional reflection, and (c) examples of anti-missional reflection.

Common Theological Commitments

One denominational executive believes that while Anabaptist theology seems to be a majority commitment among constituents of Mennonite Church USA, there may be some drift toward other theological streams. Interestingly, all participants in this study
identified the theological commitments of the developing churches as being within an Anabaptist theological framework (Barrett, 2006; Murray, 2000; Shenk, 2000). In exploring the theological commitments of these developing churches, participants gave expression to a remarkably consistent set of core emphases. These emphases include believers’ baptism, the authority of Scripture, the normative teachings of Jesus, community discernment in discipleship, justice, peacemaking, reconciliation of all things as a sign of God’s reign, simplicity in lifestyle, and an understanding of the church as engaged with but self-differentiated from society. In all cases, the way in which church planters and their key stakeholders talked about their aspirations and failures demonstrated a theological commitment to embodied humility.

**Positive Missional Reflection**

Interviews, documents, and observations gleaned evidence that an understanding of a missional ecclesiology is present to some extent among the participants in five ways. It will become evident that Anglo and ethnic/minority leaders differ in their perspective on how these commitments are expressed.

First, all participants expressed in some way a Trinitarian understanding that God’s mission to reconcile the world to himself precedes human initiative in the context of ministry. This is the classic doctrine of *missio Dei* (Bosch, 1991). All leaders in the cases of developing churches believe that their mode of “sentness” should be normative for all churches. In other words, none of the church planters or their key stakeholders expressed that the work that they were doing was an aberrant form of ministry. While the church planters expressed need for outside counsel and expressed gratitude for
connecting to a larger ecclesial system, they gave no indication that the work they were
doing was in some way “on behalf of” a sending church.

Second, all participants expressed an understanding of the contextual sensitivity
that is a mark of the missional church (Barrett, 2006). The ethnic/minority church
planters emphasized this contextual sensitivity in terms of the uniqueness of their own
subculture within American society. The Anglo leaders and church planters emphasized
cultural sensitivity suggesting that anyone planting a church needs to spend time
interpreting the context in which the church is being planted. A denominational leader
suggested that this contextual sensitivity should seek to identify the polarities within a
context in order to discover where the reconciling work of God in Jesus is occurring and,
therefore, where the church’s witness is most immediately needed. The leader of
Hospitality House suggested that the need to interpret the context in which a church is
being planted means that church planters should not do anything in the context until they
have lived in the context long enough to be accepted by the residents of that context. The
attention given to context leads to a related third aspect of missional ecclesiology
identified among the participants: hospitality.

The missional church practices “hospitality by welcoming the stranger” (Barrett,
2004, p. 169). While this understanding of hospitality emphasizes the church’s
welcoming role, the participants in this study emphasized that hospitality, in a missional
frame, is three dimensional. The common life of missional churches reflects the
reconciling hospitality of God which has been given to believers as a gift of grace. Out of
this awareness, the church extends hospitality to the world because the church has known
the goodness of this gracious reception. But just as God allowed the world to set the
terms under which he sent his son, Jesus, the missional church’s hospitality is formed by a prior sensitivity to the ways that the context is willing to host the church. Central to a missional understanding of hospitality is a conviction that God’s love is never coercive in any of the three dimensions.

One denominational leader suggested that when planting a church, one wants to ask of the context, “Where would I be welcomed?” Hospitality House leaders suggested that the church’s ministry can be understood only in the dialectic of hosting and being hosted. The pastor of the New Covenant Hmong Mennonite Church became aware of the need to encourage his members to move beyond fellowship to the greater engagement with society involved in hospitality.

The missional understanding of contextualization leads to a fourth aspect of missional ecclesiology resident among the participants in this study: the intent to provide holistic ministry that seeks to incarnate the Gospel story (Murray, 2000). Community Mennonite leaders suggest that the key to hospitality is looking for the places where the need for reconciliation and wholeness in the context most naturally intersects with the gifts within the congregation. Growing from out of their common theological commitments, the leaders of these developing congregations and their key stakeholders are constantly asking how to develop a holistic ministry of reconciliation, peace, and justice that will model life under the reign of God.

Fifth, the church planters and their key stakeholders exemplify a missional ecclesiology in their reaction to modern expressions of the church as the steward and purveyor of normative social values. An indicator of the missional church is a church that “understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life,
death, and resurrection of Jesus” (Barrett, 2004, p. 160). Most of the participants in this study understand the church to be different from the world yet engaged with the world’s need for reconciliation to God. The participants in this study understand that the church is increasingly being moved to the margins of society and its power will be derived from sources different from the world. For the ethnic/minority leaders, this can be understood in no other way. As ethnic leaders, church planters and their key stakeholders live in society where they assume that others are privileged by the dominant powers. For Anglo leaders, this understanding requires more thoughtfulness. Anglo Christians have been socialized to assume a measure of privilege granted by the dominant powers, and a missional frame requires unlearning that assumption of privilege even as the church’s power is being marginalized by society.

**Anti-Missional Reflection**

There are signs that theological commitments and practices of the developing churches in this study are aligned with a missional ecclesiology. There is also evidence that the prior assumptions of former mission paradigms persist. Through interviews, documents, and observations, three prior assumptions threaten to derail a missional ecclesiology.

First, denominational and conference leaders report that rather than seeing the church as an alternative society, many constituents of Mennonite Church USA want the church to be a vendor of therapeutic services that will enhance the sense of well-being of the individual. One Mennonite leader offered this observation, “People want the church to help them live the life they have chosen a little bit better rather than asking the church to prepare them for life which is to come.” This tendency forms churches toward a prior
assumption of developing programs rather than incarnational ministries. If existing congregations attempt to develop new missional congregations, they will need to gain understand how to avoid the tendency of the church to be a vendor of therapeutic services lest this tendency is propagated in the spiritual DNA of the new churches.

Second, denominational and conference leaders question whether the members of Mennonite Church USA are able to participate in reciprocal hospitality. Reflecting the struggle of the early church to accommodate uncircumcised converts, it is easy for Mennonites to invite people into their space, so long as it remains “Mennonite space.” It is much more difficult for Mennonites to imagine a reciprocal form of hospitality that results in the creation of a new space, even if, in essence, the new space embodies centered-set commitments. There is a persistent but tacit hope, particularly among the Anglo participants, that new Mennonite churches will feel like familiar established Mennonite churches. In the case of Community Mennonite Church, longtime Mennonites who came to the developing church see themselves as playing “host” to the “neo-Mennonites” who are founding the church. Among a number of participants in this study there is a tacit hope for ecclesiastical tribalism. In other words, there is an unspoken hope among many participants that developing missional churches of many cultures will result in churches of like-minded people who share certain ethnic patterns.

At the other end of the spectrum is the case of Hospitality House whose emphasis on reciprocal hospitality was present from its inception. Reciprocal hospitality in this case is an explicit foundational core value. Hospitality House has a remarkable ability to be present to its context, expecting little of the context other than making friendships. In a follow-up conversation, the Hospitality House pastor shared a story that occurred as the
church members prepared and served their weekly meal at a vacant lot during a major political party’s national convention when it was held in their city. This meal consists of wholesome food prepared on site and served using crockery dinnerware and actual silverware. The meal is shared among church members and any who pass by. The strategy of using non-disposable dinnerware and utensils is intended to keep people at the site for the meal to ensure substantive fellowship. On the eve of the major political party’s national convention, the church members were going about this weekly act of hospitality. As the meal began to attract guests of many nationalities, the scene was “questionable” enough to attract a team of Homeland Security officials who arrived asking investigative questions. Hospitality House members explained in theological terms what they were doing and promptly served up helpings of the meal to the Homeland Security officials who received the food and remained in conversation for the duration of the meal. This is a clear example of a church that is willing to extend hospitality by creating shared space with little fear that doing so will result in compromising the mission and convictions of the church. The willingness to immerse a church’s life this deeply into a complex social context must be directly related to the security and confidence the members of a church have in their own centered-set core convictions. It is interesting to consider how bringing stories like this to the attention of the constituency of Mennonite Church USA might stimulate new experiments in other communities.

Third, because of the strong influence of 19th-century missionary models, the default mode of leadership can often revert to replicating rather than reproducing forms of church and ministry. In all cases, participants tended to borrow models of church and ministry from more programmatic approaches or to react to those models of church. In
either case, there was a strong awareness of what other churches have done. Church leaders differ with regard to whether they are allured toward replicating models of “successful growth” or repelled by the models that seem to “program” for the increase of numbers. In either case, denominational and conference leaders along with three cases of developing churches struggle with the relationship between the essence and form of ministry in a missional frame. Again, Hospitality House is unique among the cases in this regard. It seems that at every level, the church planter and key stakeholders self-consciously articulated the way the essence of the church shapes the form of the church’s ministry. Whether church leaders are allured toward replicating models of “successful growth” or repelled by the models that seem to “program” for growth, these responses are driven, at least in part, by the nature of the church-growth literature currently available and the lack of empirical research on developing missional churches. One recent contribution to the empirical research on missional churches is the work of Barrett (2004) who, with others, conducted case research on congregations thought to be missional. Her study identified 12 indicators of the missional church. Looking at Barrett’s (2004) 12 indicators of the missional church, Hospitality House is unique among the four cases in this study in exemplifying all 12 of these indicators (see appendix B).

Developing a missional ecclesiology as a foundational commitment within the organization culture will require the attention to leadership at every level. Interestingly, it would appear that congregational leaders within Mennonite Church USA have embraced a missional frame for leadership. There is, however, a gap between the expectations that pastors and congregational members have for the role of pastoral leadership. In his 2007 study of Mennonite Church USA, Kanagy has identified that church members continue to
emphasize the “chaplaincy” role of pastors while pastors emphasize the role of “shaping the congregation’s vision” and “equipping others for ministry” (p. 74). This discrepancy in leadership expectations will need to be addressed if the grassroots of Mennonite Church USA will reflect a missional ecclesiology. In some cases, church planters are working in a context free of longstanding traditions. It is possible that the profiles of missional church planters can give established congregations the imagination needed to rethink what they are looking for from their leaders.

Research Question #3–Contextual Pressures

Missional ecclesiology assumes that missional church will be incarnational in essence but contextually relevant in form (Murray, 2000). The third research question in this study asked, “With what contextual pressures do church planters and their key stakeholders contend in the process of planting churches?” The data from this study revealed considerable and weighty pressures that make church planting in the 21st century particularly difficult. The participants identified contextual pressures in two categories: cultural/social pressures and challenges to progress.

Cultural/Social Pressures

Denominational and conference leaders identified cultural and social pressures that broadly encompassed those named by the church planters and their key stakeholders. These contextual pressures included (a) a growing ambivalence toward organized religion in North American society, (b) the marginalization of the church in society, (c) inhospitable immigration policies, (d) language barriers, (e) overwhelming social
complexity, and (f) the pressure on Mennonites to acculturate into mainstream American individualism.

Not surprisingly, the most influential social and cultural pressures identified by ethnic/minority church planters and stakeholders involved issues related to their status as ethnic minorities. Broad social pressures with which these church planters and stakeholders contend include language barriers, inhospitable immigration policies, and poverty related to being displaced persons. Both Hispanic and Hmong church planters spoke of strong family pressure put upon those who decide to join a Mennonite church. In the Hispanic context, those joining a Mennonite church face family disapproval for leaving the Catholic Church. In the Hmong context, those becoming Christian of any sort face family disapproval for leaving traditional animist religious practices, particularly as Hmong Christians eschew the services of the shaman.

The ethnic/minority church planters and stakeholders also identified a number of social pressures with which they contend that exist within the culture of Mennonite Church USA. These forces include a perceived skepticism from White churches, intercultural misunderstanding, and language barriers. Inconsistent patterns of offering financial support to ethnic/minority leaders contribute to the perception that White leaders do not understand the unique contexts of ethnic/minority communities and the perception that ethnic/minority leaders are not to be trusted with the financial support they may receive.

Denominational and conference leaders characterized a key pressure that works against church planting as the desire for simplicity amidst so much complexity. This pressure is related to the trends and anti-trends described by Hempelmann (2003) as the
desire for individualism/new community movements and religious tolerance/desire for simplicity. Both of these pressures are evidence of a growing post-Christendom reality in North America. It is, perhaps, not surprising that these pressures were named by the Anglo church leaders and stakeholders whose worldview assumed privilege. These contextual pressures are described from a Western worldview that assumes a past normative experience of Christendom. Among Anglo constituents of Mennonite Church USA, a primary commitment to the church can no longer be assumed.

Anglo church planters and key stakeholders described the attitudes present in their contexts as ambivalent toward organized and modern (Christendom) expressions of church. They describe the people with whom they come in contact as preoccupied with busyness and inconsistent in the level to which they are willing to participate in the life of an organized church. While this ambivalence toward organized religion reflects the individualism of post-Christendom, church planters and key stakeholders also see in the people with whom they come in contact the anti-trend of an intense search for belonging.

**Challenges to Progress**

The second category of contextual pressure with which church planters contend involves a wide range of issues that threaten to derail progress in developing the missional congregation. Among denominational and conference leaders, these issues involve matters of organizational and structural alignment. There is a perceived lack of clarity about who sets direction for church planting: the executive leadership office, the denominational mission agency, the conference ministry staff, or individuals with a heart for church planting? Denominational and conference leaders believe that there is more talk than action with regard to developing a strategy for developing missional
congregations of many cultures. In the midst of this systemic confusion, church planters feel somewhat frustrated in knowing how to interface with the larger ecclesial system in order to find resources for support and training. At a gathering for the church planters in this study, the church planters were asked to identify what they needed most from their conference. The responses recorded in the proceedings indicated the felt need for more relational support and opportunities for learning. Church planters asked for “strong, formalized and living relationships between established conference churches and new churches, prayer and encouragement, leadership training opportunities, equipping for congregational leaders in new churches, and training in dealing with immigration/deportation issues.”

Church planters and key stakeholders consistently identified the lack of financial resources as an obstacle to progress. Surprising to conference leaders, the church planters did not mention money one time in their joint gathering when asked what they needed most from the conference. This would indicate that while the lack of money is seen as an obstacle to the church’s development, church planters do not necessarily expect that more money should be provided by conference or the denomination in the form of subsidy.

Denominational and conference leaders and church planters all agreed that when church planters are bi-vocational, the distractions associated with outside employment slow down the church’s development.

Though church planters and key stakeholders do not expect more financial resources to come from conference or denomination in the form of subsidy, it is unlikely that churches can be planted without financial resources coming from somewhere. It is possible that conference leaders, in their role of “making connections,” could develop
systems by which church planters appeal to nearby established congregations to develop partnerships for mission as described by Manuel (2001) and Tiessen (2004). These partnerships may carry the prospect of financial support for the developing congregation, but more importantly provide an opportunity for substantive relational exchange that creates a laboratory for mutual inquiry in the development of a missional ecclesiology. Conference and denominational leaders would need to give significant attention to how these relationships are structured to avoid the dynamic of what one conference leader has described as the relationship between a wise senior partner (the established congregation) and an ill-equipped junior partner (the developing congregation). Recovering the vision of “learning communities” as described in the denomination’s formational document (Burkholder et al., 2001) could provide the formative model for these relationships.

Question 4–The Role of Church Planter

Church planters are generally seen as the bearer of the vision for the new church. One denominational executive said, “As goes the vision of the church planter, so goes the church.” The final question posed in this study explored how church planters understand their primary contributions to developing the churches they are planting. Participants identified two key areas where the role of the church planter contributes to the development of a new church. These two areas are the development of common understanding within the developing church and leadership development.

Developing Common Understanding

Church planters are seen by themselves and others as playing a pivotal role in the development of common understanding about the vision and nature of the church that is
being planted. With characteristic humility, the church planters interviewed for this study reflected on their *inabilities* to do this. It was often the stakeholders who complimented the way church planters were successful in developing common understanding within the group. Interviewing church planters on their role in developing common understanding in the church plant while sitting in the presence of key stakeholders provided the occasion for the church planters to reflect deeply in and on experience. This is reminiscent of models in adult learning described by Kolb’s model of reflection-on-action (described by Merriam & Caffarella, 2006), Heidegger’s understanding of unfolding circularity (as cited in Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006, p. 392), and Dall’Alba’s and Sandberg’s (2006) theory of understanding of, and in, practice (p. 403). Out of their reflection in and on their experience, the church planters expressed a desire to be less passive about articulating their vision. One church planter identified that separating his livelihood from church planting has made him a more effective and authentic leader. The church planters all expressed a desire to be more strategically prepared. They want to be more effective at transferring the vision to the members of the fledgling congregation. Though they want to be competent preachers and teachers, they feel they have few models for how to do these tasks in a context where the group is so small.

**Leadership Development**

Denominational and conference leaders believe that the denominational system may have a role to play in the leadership development of church planters. In the formational documents of Mennonite Church USA, framers envisioned an extensive network of learning communities for various mission initiatives within the new denomination. A set of learning communities was to be established for persons involved
in church planting. A mission agency leader who was initially in charge of the learning community concept reports, “As far as I know, only one-time learning community events have occurred, none on a recurring schedule.”

Church planters and conference leaders do not agree on the role that conference leaders will play in leadership development. Conference leaders do not expect that their role will be to provide leadership training experiences. Instead, they expect that their role will be to connect church planters to leadership development resources. Conference leaders also believe that they can provide opportunities for quality control in the assessment of potential church planters. Church planters want conference leaders to provide leadership training experiences not only to church planters but also lay leaders within the fledgling congregation.

When church planters were asked about the role they play in leadership development, it is clear that they see this as one of their fundamental tasks. Key stakeholders were uniformly complimentary toward the role that the church planter has played in leadership development. The church planters were characterized as “willing to share the platform.” Church planters are concerned to provide leadership development that is grounded in the wisdom of the church versus the wisdom of the world. The church planters also characterize leadership development as emergent based on volunteer initiative and felt need. The approach of the church planters to leadership training would best be characterized as constructivist (DeLay, 1996), where the church planter is providing only the scaffolding necessary for the church member to reach the next level of competence. In all four cases of church planting, church planters agree that the local congregation-in-context should be the center for theological training.
In the role of “making connections” it seems that conference leaders can create the occasions for church planters to reflect in and on their experience by creating learning experiences that involve conference leaders, church planters, and key stakeholders. Absent any of these elements—church planter, conference staff, or key stakeholders—the story that is told may reflect a reality that is shaped to satisfy one of the participants in the conversation. Including all three players—church planter, conference staff, and key stakeholder—will ensure a level of vulnerability and honesty on the part of the participants that is a clearer reflection of reality and that will create a context for deeper learning and the development of common understanding. Including key stakeholders in the conversation between conference staff and church planter also draws the stakeholder into deeper reflection on the stakeholder’s role in the developing congregation. This reflection would certainly provide the opportunity for key stakeholders to assess their role and competencies, and consider how they are contributing to or detracting from the forward movement of planting the church.

Summary

This chapter analyzed the data collected from interviews, documents, retreat proceedings, and observations with denominational and conference leaders of Mennonite Church USA and four cases of church planting. This analysis answered the four research questions of this study. This data analysis described the relationships, behaviors, and organizations of Mennonite Church USA relative to the development of missional congregations of many cultures, the common theological commitments and missional alignment found among the cases, the contextual pressures with which church planters
contend as they seek to plant their churches, and the key roles the church planter plays in the churches that are being planted.
CHAPTER VII

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction

In 2001, two Mennonite denominations merged into one, creating Mennonite Church USA. Five years into the transformation process, the delegates to the denomination’s national assembly adopted a statement of the denomination’s purpose: “Joining in God’s activity in the world, WE [sic] develop and nurture missional Mennonite congregations of many cultures” (Mennonite Church USA Executive Board, 2006, para. 2). This study was an attempt to describe the experience of church planters in one Midwestern regional conference of Mennonite Church USA as they develop missional congregations in complex social contexts while the denomination is undergoing systemic organizational change.

The adoption of a mission statement to “develop and nurture missional congregations of many cultures” represents a paradigm shift in the denomination’s ecclesiology. While the church’s denominational leadership and intelligentsia are increasingly committed to the pursuit of a missional ecclesiology as the foundational theological paradigm, many in the denomination have not experienced the new paradigm as a core identity. Additionally, many have complained that the denominational culture and structural relationships do not reflect clear alignment to support this new paradigm. Recent Executive Board action communicated this understanding to the denominational constituency.
As the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA, we speak with a single and unified voice declaring that our vision and call to engage in God’s purposes in the world is not adequately supported by our present relationships, behaviors and organization. (Houser, 2008, p. 22)

People involved in church leadership and church planting are working in the crucible of multiple realities where paradoxical trends occupy the same space (Hempelmann, 2003). For example, our society experiences growing religious relativism while at the same time many people are seeking simplicity. The social contexts in which churches are being planted are marked by growing secularization on the one hand and a new religiosity on the other. The possibilities of these divergent realities existing together at the same time in the same society means that it is no longer possible to talk about a world that is moving toward Christian normalization (Peachey, 1965). Church planters must contend with a secular context that is no longer propped up by Christendom values. Therefore, leaders find themselves working in complex situations of discontinuous change in which “the skills and capacities in which they were trained are of little use in addressing a new situation and a new environment” (Roxburgh & Romanuk, 2006, p. 9).

Over the past 20 years, one Midwestern regional conference of Mennonite Church USA has invested between $1.5 and 2 million in support of developing churches in communities and among ethnic groups where there currently are no constituent churches. The working model for church planting in this conference was largely borrowed from mainline and other Protestant denominations. In this model, substantial salary subsidies were provided to employ full-time church planters. These subsidies were then reduced over a period of 5 years in the hope that at the end of the 5-year period a self-sustaining congregation would have emerged. In spite of investing nearly $2 million over a 20-year span ending in 2005, no self-supporting congregations had emerged as a result of the
conference’s church-planting strategy. After 20 years, it has become clear to conference leaders that it is past time to stop trying to implement the same strategy, hoping for different results.

Without a coherent ecclesiology, visions originate and develop in seemingly random ways that result in a diffused organizational culture, structure, process, and strategy (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1999). At the same time, the denominational leadership is attempting to initiate a change in the organizational culture and structure that requires a shift in the basic ecclesial assumptions of the denomination. When these elements are not aligned by a coherent conceptual framework, the future of the developing churches is in peril from the outset. As Schein (1985) asserts, even though an organization devises a strategy that makes sense, “they cannot implement those strategies because they require assumptions, values, and ways of working that are too far out of line with the organization’s prior assumptions” (p. 30). In 2005, the conference declared a moratorium on significant financial subsidies to church planters. The conference has instead channeled its funding toward the infrastructure needed to develop a more strategic approach to church planting that reflects a missional ecclesiology.

**Problem and Purpose of Study**

The problem in focus for this study is the struggle of church planters and their key stakeholders to develop common understanding about the nature of churches that are being planted in complex contexts of discontinuous change. The purpose of this study was to describe the processes whereby church planters and their respective key stakeholders develop missional congregations in complex social contexts while relating to a denomination and conference undergoing an ecclesial paradigm shift.
This research used a multiple case design with an emphasis on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This method was chosen because a case study approach provided a method for developing understanding about a process from the perspective of the key stakeholders. Case study was a preferred method of inquiry because this study was concerned with the “how” and “why” of the processes involved in developing common understanding among Mennonite Church USA church planters and their respective key stakeholders (Merriam, 1998). Given the admission of the denominational and conference leaders that the system is underperforming in the development of missional congregations, what is needed is not to understand the “what” of the process of developing missional congregations. What is needed is to develop the “how” and the “why” of developing competency in the embodiment of a missional paradigm at the organizational and grassroots levels. Case studies draw the researcher in closer to real-life situations thereby avoiding the “stultified learning process, which in research can lead to ritual academic blind alleys where the effect and usefulness of research becomes unclear and untested” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223). Though large-scale context-independent study is important, particularly for novices, “the highest level in the learning process, that is, virtuosity and true expertise, are reached only via a person’s own experiences as practitioner of the relevant skills” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 223). Case study was chosen as the design of this study because it necessarily brings the researcher into close proximity to inquire into a context-rich picture of life as it is lived. Case studies can help us “achieve competence, whereas context-independent facts and rules will bring the student just to the beginner’s level” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 222).
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was provided by the basic assumptions of missional ecclesiology and organizational culture theory. Missional theology, as an ecclesiology, is a recent theoretical genre whose roots can be traced back to the first third of the 20th century. Missional theology has only begun to be identified as a distinct theological paradigm by name in the past two decades (Barrett, 2002, 2006; Guder, 1998; Van Gelder, 2000). With a few exceptions little has been written on the development of a vision for missional ecclesiology from a social science research perspective (Barrett, 2004). Many books and articles written by church planters are intended to provide anecdotal stories of “success” (Cole, 2005; Roberts, 2008). Others are written from the perspective of theology and conceptual framework (Shenk & Stutzman, 1988; Stetzer, 2006). Little has been written to document how church planters and key stakeholders work to develop shared meaning about the nature of the churches that are being planted in a missional perspective.

This case study contributes to a much needed conceptual knowledge base with regard to the development of processes that lead to common understanding for the nature of missional churches being planted within complex social contexts. This study offers a unique contribution to the literature by describing the process of church planting from the nexus of organizational change theory, missional ecclesiology, and church planting strategy.

Central to missional theology is an understanding of mission as participation in the sending of God rather than mission activity that originates in the imagination of the church. The church’s mission has no life of its own. “The genetic code of the missional church makes it missionary in its very essence” (Van Gelder, 2005, p. 33). In this new
concept of mission, mission is not primarily an act of the church but an attribute of God” (Bosch, 1991, p. 390). The nature of the church is no longer understood in imperial terms as a power seeking to normalize Christianity. Borrowing from Lesslie Newbigin, to extend this paradigm, Art McPhee (2001) writes that God’s people are involved in mission not out of obligation but out of a new identity.

When Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8), he was not issuing a command but making a statement about the nature of his followers. Likewise the New Testament’s metaphor’s for believers—salt, light, fishers, stars, letters, ambassadors, good seed—are never made in the imperatives. They are always indicative [emphasis mine], attesting that mission is the natural activity of the church. (p. 10)

An important aspect of missional ecclesiology involves how the church contextualizes its ministry in light of Christendom’s demise. The process of contextualizing the church’s mission has been described by two principles: the indigenization and the pilgrim principles (Walls, 1996). These principles ask the question, “How can the Gospel be incarnated in culturally relevant ways and how is the Gospel simultaneously incarnated in ways that will challenge the context in which it is emerging?”

The work of implementing a missional ecclesiology as the foundation commitment of Mennonite Church USA directly relates to organizational culture. Schein (1985) believes that organizational culture is the most important issue if leaders intend to affect systemic change within the organization. In Schein’s view, one does not understand the culture of an organization until one works to understand the basic ontological and epistemological assumptions that operate deeply within the organization. While the two denominations that merged in 2001 shared symbols of an organizational culture through such things as a recently adopted confession of faith
and a common hymnal, neither of these denominations reflected an organization aligned with the basic assumptions of a missional ecclesiology.

Methodology

To understand the processes whereby church planters and their respective key stakeholders develop missional congregations in complex social contexts while relating to a denomination and conference undergoing an ecclesial paradigm shift, data were collected in a number of ways. First, interviews were conducted with denominational leaders and the ministry staff of the conference in which the four churches in this study were being planted. These interviews were conducted to understand the relationship between the denominational and conference structures and the development “of missional congregations of many cultures” (Mennonite Church USA, 2006). These data were used to describe the views of these leaders with regard to the systemic paradigm shift that Mennonite Church USA is currently undergoing. In both the denominational- and conference-level interviews, an elected officer of the denominational and conference levels was invited to participate with their respective staffs. These individuals represented a governance perspective in the interviews and served as an accountability check for staff responses.

Second, separate interviews were conducted in the context of the four church plants. These churches included four diverse examples of church planting in one Midwestern regional conference of Mennonite Church USA: a Hispanic church plant in a small university city, an Anglo church in a small university city, a Hmong church in a large metropolitan area, and a multi-cultural church in a densely populated inner city context. Interviews were conducted with the church planters and their key stakeholders to
understand how these congregations were developing in complex social contexts as they relate to denominational and conference structures undergoing systemic change in organizational culture.

Third, a retreat was planned to gather church planters, one selected stakeholder from each church plant, and two members of the conference ministry staff. This retreat was designed to facilitate a dialogue among the church planters to compare their experiences and contexts, to understand why they are planting churches, and to identify their felt needs for support.

Fourth, documents were gathered, where available, that provided a paper trail that articulated the basic assumptions of denominational, conference, and church-planting systems. The interview transcripts, retreat proceedings, documents, field notes, and other artifacts were analyzed in an attempt to answer the four research questions in focus for this study.

Findings and Discussion

This section reports the major findings from the analysis of the case data. The findings related to each research question are stated followed by a brief discussion of the finding.

Question 1

Question 1 asked: In what ways do the relationships, behaviors, and organization of Mennonite Church USA support or fail to support the development of “missional congregations” within Mennonite Church USA and one regional Midwestern conference?

With regard to the first research question, the data indicate that the relationships, behaviors, and organization of Mennonite Church USA do not yet adequately support the
development of “missional congregations” within Mennonite Church USA. The attempt to establish a missional culture within the denominational organization has been subverted by an incoherent change process resulting in growing structural misalignment in the denominational system.

This finding brings into focus the question of how denominational and conference leaders can make progress toward the stated mission of the denomination. At present, denominational and conference leaders seem to be unclear about how to further develop the missional culture and bring structural alignment to the denominational system. Adopting a new missional paradigm as a basic understanding of the denomination’s character and function has a direct implication for how leaders work at developing the organizational culture and bring structural alignment that will support a missional future.

Adopting the new missional paradigm has to do with how the parts of the church are aligned into a whole. This study showed that at least three subcultures exist within the denominational system, each working with different levels of functional priorities. These subcultures include the executive culture, the interlocutor culture (regional conference ministry staffs), and the incarnational culture (those who are seeking to embody a missional ecclesiology at the grassroots). There are likely many subcultures within each of these (Hatch, 1997). Creating alignment among the parts of the denominational system “is not a case of deciding which one has the right point of view, but of creating enough mutual understanding between them to evolve solutions that will be understood and implemented” (Schein, 1997, para. 49).

In declaring that the structures, behaviors, and relationships are not adequate to support a missional future, the Executive Board of Mennonite Church USA determined to
manage the culture of the denomination by strengthening the control functions of
Executive Leadership by subordinating the other administrative structures and
governance boards (Houser, 2008). This approach has elicited considerable resistance by
many people at all levels of the system who characterize this approach as “top down,”
“reductionistic,” and “command and control.” Strengthening the control functions of
Executive Leadership while subordinating the other administrative structures and
governance boards is an attempt to impose an organizational culture rather than engaging
the parts to create mutual understanding. Imposing an organizational culture through
strengthened control functions is unlikely to produce a mature organizational culture in
which the change to a missional paradigm can be anchored (Kotter, 1996).

Managing the organizational culture by strengthening the control functions of
Executive Leaders while subordinating the other administrative structures and
governance boards provides evidence that the organization is viewed in instrumental
terms for accountable results. This raises a fundamental question about the basic
assumptions of the new mission paradigm for the denominational culture. Does a
missional ecclesiology itself offer a method for creating an organizational culture and
structural alignment for the new denomination?

The basic assumptions of a missional ecclesiology call for a narratological
approach rather than an instrumental approach to developing mutual understanding.
There is significant value in the way analysis of narratives constructs meaning in life
(Roesler, 2006).

A narratological approach to developing understanding involves the analysis of
narratives that describes human experience. In the case of missional ecclesiology, a
narratological approach would seek to analyze the stories of the church in the context of a learning community seeking to understand what is going on in an experience from the perspective of mission.

A narratological approach is more than the collection of stories for the purposes of replication. The narratological method examines narratives from those who are working to implement the “indigenization” and “pilgrim” principles (Walls, 1996). That is, how is the Gospel incarnated in culturally relevant ways and how is the Gospel simultaneously incarnated in ways that will challenge the context in which it is emerging? The analysis of these narratives explores how the archetypal understandings of the Gospel story are governing in conscious and unconscious ways the development of new congregations.

A narratological approach to developing a missional culture could carry the denomination to new levels of formative inquiry. In this approach the denominational and conference leaders would collect the narrative experiences of those who are developing missional congregations “at the growing edges of the church.” This approach to leadership could begin to align the denominational system around a learning function rather than an instrumental function, to the rich benefit of both established and developing Mennonite churches.

In this model the mode of learning is generative rather than exploitative. Understanding develops in the organization from the particular to the universal, rather than from the boardroom to the grassroots. The medium of that learning is reflexive dialogue rather than diagnostic discussion (Hatch, 1997; Schein, 2003; Senge, 2006). Reflexive dialogue becomes a core discipline of the organization where leaders become
“observers of their own thinking” (Senge, 2006, p. 242). Such a learning community paradigm was proposed by a missional transformation project conducted by the denominational mission agencies (Flaming et al., 2000) but never implemented.

We see an example of this sort of “meaning making” from the early church’s struggle to adopt a new mission paradigm. Acts 15 recounts how early leaders met in Jerusalem to resolve the “pilgrim” and “indigenization” issues that emerged as the Gospel spread beyond the Jewish community (Acts 15). In that remarkable event, space was opened for Peter, Paul, and Barnabas to tell the stories of how God was bringing reconciliation among Gentile believers. These stories challenged former assumptions about circumcision as a prerequisite for entrance into the Christian community. Hearing the stories that Peter, Paul, and Barnabas brought back from the missionary frontier not only challenged the prior understandings of the Jewish leaders, these stories had the effect of confronting the way in which former assumptions weighed down the faith experience of the traditional believers. These stories were received as an undeniable movement of God’s Spirit (15:8-9). Peter said, “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” This statement was the turning point in the debate that brought the whole assembly to silence and reflection (15:12). This narratival approach to constructing meaning also became the springboard for a dramatically repackaged understanding of the meaning of membership. The requirement of circumcision would no longer be imposed upon the Gentile believers. James, the presider over the council, determined that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning
toward God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20).

This approach is similar to other organizational theorists who propose that mutual understanding develops through the “awareness of the multiplicity of meanings” that are being socially created within the system (Hatch, 1997, p. 235). Another way of thinking about this is by looking at the organization through a “symbolic” rather than a “political” frame (Boleman & Deal, 1997). Instead of focusing on instrumental understandings that seek accountable results, leaders use “meaning” rather than “results” as the basis for organizational development. Denominational and conference leaders would view the system not in terms of the parts and output of a machine, but as a storied organism. The analysis of narratives collected “on the ground” provides the indicators for what is needed from the “executive” and “interlocutor” subcultures. In other words, the analysis of these stories would surface how a missional ecclesiology is emerging from the grassroots and what kinds of resources are yet need to further develop understanding in a missional frame.

A narratological approach to systemic alignment and the development of organizational culture is more consistent methodologically with a Mennonite theological framework and a missional ecclesiology. In short, a narrative approach to organizational issues helps Mennonite leaders be more Mennonite and those who want to be missional more missional in the development of mutual understanding for a common organizational culture. The way of being for Mennonites is inherently narratological. There is no Mennonite identity apart from the text Mennonites read (Huebner, 2005). Or as Yoder
has said, “the presence of the text within the community is an inseparable part of the community’s act of being itself. It would be a denial of the community’s being itself if it were to grant a need for an appeal beyond itself to some Archimedean point to justify it” (Yoder, 2001, p. 114). If Mennonite approaches to being and knowing are narrative and missional approaches to being and knowing are narrative, it only stands to reason that generative learning through reflexive dialogue will result in a more coherent organizational structure for a Mennonite missional culture.

Question 2

Question 2 asked: What common theological commitments are present in the churches being planted in one regional Midwestern conference of Mennonite Church USA, and how are these developing churches aligned with a missional ecclesiology?

The data related to the second research question demonstrated that there are significant common theological commitments among the church plants. These theological commitments include the authority of Scripture, the normative teachings of Jesus, believers’ baptism, community discernment in discipleship, justice, peacemaking, reconciliation of all things as a sign of God’s reign, simplicity in lifestyle, and an understanding of the church as different from, yet engaged with, society.

I also found evidence that a missional ecclesiology is operational among the church planters and their key stakeholders. The church-planting cases demonstrated missional understandings that are resident among church planters and their key stakeholders. These understandings include the classical view of missio Dei (Bosch, 1991), contextual sensitivity, hospitality by welcoming the stranger, holistic and incarnational ministry, and a reaction to modern expressions of the church as the steward
and purveyor of normative social values. Additionally, this study surfaced a deepened understanding of three-dimensional hospitality as a foundational and formative missional value.

An understanding of three-dimensional hospitality contributes to the missional ecclesiology literature with regard to hospitality as a mark of the missional church (Barrett, 2004; Keifert, 1992). Hospitality is often described in missional literature from the perspective of hosting the stranger into the church’s space. Out of the data collected from this study, an understanding of three-dimensional hospitality emerged. Two dimensions of hospitality are rather conventional: demonstrating hospitality in the common life of the church members and welcoming the stranger. The data in this study surfaced a dimension of hospitality that precedes the other two and can easily be overlooked when churches are being planted: receiving the hospitality of those in the context in which one is planting a church. One church planter pled that this understanding of hospitality is foundational for all church planting. “Before you plant a church you need to submit to the neighborhood for awhile first. So ideally, someone should just work and live and hang out in the neighborhood for at least a year before they even start doing anything tangible as far as ministry . . . so they are really . . . understanding where they are.”

Interestingly, this understanding of hospitality was foundational to the missionary experiments Jesus conducted with his disciples (for example, Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; and Luke 10:1-20). In all of these cases, Jesus sends out the disciples with the mandate to receive the hospitality that anyone offers. Luke 10 is most emphatic,

Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if a person is there who shares in peace your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to
you. Remain the same house eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves his wages. Do not move about from house to house. (Luke 10:6-7)

When the disciples returned from this mission, they were bubbling with accounts of miraculous occurrences of healing and exorcism: “Lord, in your name, even the demons submit to us!” (Luke 10:17). There is little in the research literature that emphasizes this aspect of hospitality. So much of the strategic analysis that is a part of pre-planting planning is done from the vantage point of diagnosing the context rather than being received by the context. This is a place where the domestic denominational church-planting strategists could learn much from the stories of those who have worked diligently to apply the “indigenizing” and “pilgrim” principles (Walls, 1996) in domestic cross-cultural and international contexts.

The developing congregations in this study are contextualizing their ministries in communities where an awareness of Mennonite theology is not assumed. Because of their newness, their small size, and the incredible energy required in the startup of a new congregation, church plants often exist under the radar of the denomination. Yet, these churches provide excellent case material for understanding how a missional ecclesiology emerges. To wit, these churches demonstrate the “pilgrim” and “indigenization” principles because, given their context, they must. They may do it better or worse, consistently or inconsistently. Nevertheless, they all must be working at the issue of how to incarnate the Gospel in culturally relevant ways while simultaneously working to incarnate the Gospel in ways that will challenge the context in which the new church is emerging. A narratological analysis of the experience of these churches can provide an
influential learning opportunity for all congregations of Mennonite Church USA, and perhaps beyond.

The narratological analysis of the data from this study located tensions between positive missional reflection and anti-missional reflection resident among developing churches (see Table 3). Locating these points of tension provides denominational and conference leaders a frame of reference within which to develop initiatives intended to increase the positive missional understanding while decreasing the anti-missional understandings that threaten to derail the embodiment of the new paradigm.

Another issue raised in developing a mature missional ecclesiology has to do with a new wave of church leaders who are attracted to Mennonite theology through their reading and who are seeking a formal affiliation with the Mennonite Church. This phenomenon creates opportunity for theological ferment as those who are embracing the church from outside the tradition interact with Mennonites who have grown up in the tradition but have read little theology. One case of church planting in this study includes two founding couples joined by two couples who are lifelong Mennonites. The lifelong Mennonites have labeled the founding couples “neo-Mennonites” and have assumed a curious position of “hosting” the founding leaders of this developing church into the tradition. One wonders how the dynamics will develop between those who “know” the tradition by familial socialization and those who are “learning the tradition” through more intellectual reflection.
Table 3

*The Tension Between Positive Missional and Anti-Missional Reflection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITIVE MISSIONAL REFLECTION</th>
<th>ANTI-MISSIONAL REFLECTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The church as itself sent</td>
<td>The church as sending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproducing</td>
<td>Replicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church identifying the places of welcome in its context</td>
<td>Church hosting the context into the church’s space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarnational ministry</td>
<td>Programmatic ministry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church as engaged with but different from society</td>
<td>Church as the steward and purveyor of society’s values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church’s witness at the nexus of contextual polarities</td>
<td>Ecclesiastical tribalism–the collection of like-minded people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Colonization</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

By adopting a narratological learning-community approach to developing a missional culture, denominational and conference leaders will create elevated platforms for “neo-Mennonites” to tell their stories of coming to the denomination so that they are not overwhelmed or frustrated by a culture in which the theological distinctives are largely assumed and seldom articulated. Hearing these stories, and the fresh articulation of Mennonite theology they embody, will also challenge lifelong Mennonites to deeper and more articulate reflection on their own theological commitments. At a time when many lifelong Mennonites are wandering away from the church for a variety of reasons,
these stories could inspire those departing to think once again about the gifts this denomination, at its best, offers.

This process could be further enhanced by collecting and analyzing stories from the growing sectors of the global Anabaptist/Mennonite family. The contemporary European context reflects post-Christendom reality more acutely than in America. Stories of people coming to embrace an Anabaptist or Mennonite expression in more acutely post-Christendom societies can provide opportunities for evaluating how issues of acculturation are at work in the same and different ways in an American context. On the other hand, stories from the Southern Hemisphere and Eastern Hemispheres of the global Anabaptist/Mennonite family where the church is growing can inspire U.S. Mennonites to reflect on the hope that the church represents in the face of environments that are often hostile to the church as an alternative society.

The data also showed that there are a number of prior assumptions that threaten to derail the development of a missional ecclesiology. These assumptions include the desire among some constituents to see the church as a vendor of therapeutic services rather than an alternative society, the inability of some Mennonites to allow themselves to be hosted by others, and the tendency to replicate ministries rather than innovate reproducing, contextualized ministries.

These collective data offer significant handles to the denominational and conference leaders with regard to development of a missional organizational culture. Though denominational leaders believe that Mennonite theology still carries sway among the majority of constituents, they are concerned that Mennonite churches are becoming less Mennonite in their theological orientation. This study did not investigate the
theological commitments of established Mennonite churches. However, the data would suggest that among the studied developing congregations there is considerable consistency in theological commitments. Furthermore, these commitments are substantive enough to provide a core theology that can be the springboard toward a mature missional ecclesiology.

Question 3

Question 3 asked: With what contextual pressures do church planters and their key stakeholders contend in the process of planting churches?

The data relevant to the third research question revealed significant and varied cultural and social pressures with which church planters and their key stakeholders contend as they plant churches. One constraining pressure all church planters named was financial scarcity.

Other contextual and social pressures found included a growing ambivalence in the context toward organized religion, the marginalization of the church in society, inhospitable immigration policies, language barriers, overwhelming social complexity, and the uncritical acculturation of lifelong Mennonites into mainstream American individualism.

Obviously some of these pressures, such as language barriers and immigration policies, are felt more keenly among ethnic/minority church planters and stakeholders. One of the four church-wide priorities of Mennonite Church USA is to be an “anti-racist” denomination. Considerable resources and time have been given to delivering anti-racism training to denominational, conference, and congregational leaders. Some in the denomination have complained that framing the priority in “anti” terms makes it very
difficult to measure progress in the priority. Others contend that attempts to frame the priority in positive terms usually causes the initiatives to devolve into generic multiculturalism. Those who provide anti-racist training remain committed to labeling the training “anti-racism” because of their conviction around issues of White privilege that need to be deconstructed.

In the interviews with denominational and conference leaders, it was interesting to see the sensitivity that leaders felt toward issues of race within the denomination. When talking about race-sensitive issues, these leaders struggled mightily to find the words to express what they wanted to say. The anti-racism training seems to have deconstructed something among denominational and conference leaders. It may be time, at this level of the denominational system, to shift the attention from deconstructing racial prejudices to constructing common language with which the leader can speak more effectively to the issues. It also seems apparent from the data that the resources undergirding anti-racism training for leaders might be better allocated toward resources that could empower the church’s prophetic voice to challenge inhospitable immigration policies and provide literature for leadership development and theological training in multiple languages written to specific cultures.

Church planters and key stakeholders need denominational and conference leaders to attend to the social pressures that are an inherent part of the overwhelming complexity of this current era. In highly complex social contexts in which paradoxical values are held together (Hempelmann, 2003), denominational and conference leaders would do well to solicit from church planters and key stakeholders ways that they might provide leadership that doesn’t further complicate progress. For example, because
Executive Leadership and the denominational mission agency’s U.S. ministries department have not clarified who provides leadership for church planting, it becomes nearly impossible for church planters to connect to denominational resources, where they exist. The data show that conference leaders understand their most valuable role relative to church planters is “providing connections.” The denominational ministry department of Mennonite Church USA would do well to provide more opportunities to conference leaders to learn the art of becoming effective interlocutors between denominational leaders and the grassroots.

From a narratological perspective, stories gleaned from church life in diverse and complex social contexts can provide important learning tools for all levels of the church to develop a missional culture. More than the mere collecting and disseminating of stories, a narratological approach offers the stories accompanied with analysis that translates the underlying theological commitments that are at work in that particular context. Without this critical analysis, the stories will stand as shining examples waiting to be replicated by churches struggling to develop their own contextually appropriate missional perspective rather than serving as a springboard for innovation.

Returning to the issue of financial constraints with which developing congregations seem to universally contend, the data revealed an important understanding about the role money can or should play in developing congregations. Money becomes an important and defining symbol both for the developing church’s identity and connection to the conference or denomination. When money has been collected from conference congregations and disbursed in the form of generalized subsidy from the conference to church plants, the church plants quickly identify themselves as a “project” of the
conference, resulting in a growing dependency on the conference for sustainability. The data suggested that the church planters in this study intuit that tendency.

During a retreat with the church planters, they were asked what they would like the conference to do to support them in their work. Interestingly, receiving money from conference was not mentioned one time. Instead church planters were emphatic about their felt need for “strong, formalized and living relationships between established conference churches and new churches, prayer and encouragement, and leadership training opportunities.” This is not to suggest that providing these needs would resolve the constraint posed by financial scarcity. Nevertheless, one wonders if the conference could explore developing a system in which money is given directly from established churches to developing churches. It is possible that this flow of funds would symbolize an investment that would result in strong, formalized, and living relationships between established conference churches and new churches.

At the same time, naming the gifts that developing congregations might offer established congregations and developing systems for the deployment of those gifts would decrease the likelihood of creating dependency. It seems that the Apostle Paul did not hesitate to bring the desperate need of the established church in Jerusalem to the attention of fledgling churches like Corinth (2 Cor 9). In this case, the need was monetary in order to respond to a famine. Today the most pressing needs of established churches have to do with more non-material issues such as recovering a first love, navigating the allure of acculturation, and learning how to “bring out of [the] treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52). The stories of developing churches working at the indigenizing and pilgrim principles are excellent ways to speak to these needs.
Question 4

Question 4 asked: How do church planters understand their primary contributions to developing the churches they are planting?

In regard to the fourth research question, the data in this study revealed that church planters understand their contribution to their churches as providing congregation-based theological education and leadership development. An unexpected but perhaps more substantial finding is the level to which church planters reflect in and on their experience and how formative this reflection is in the development of their own competency.

The way church planters understand the contribution they make to the churches they are planting has significant implications for how theological education and leadership development are done in the church. One key role that church planters play is to foster a common understanding with regard to the nature and vision of the church that is being planted. Church planters are clear that this is a theological task. The other role that the data revealed is that of teacher and/or leadership developer. Because of financial and sometimes geographic constraints, participants in developing congregations often do not have access to formal theological and leadership development resources. This, however, was not perceived as problem for one church planter in particular. This leader believed that his formal theological training had given him the capacity to do substantive theological training in his congregation. The data evidenced that this was indeed the case.

Church planters believe that the congregation should be the primary center of theological education. Speaking of one of his members, one church planter said, “People wouldn’t think he’s not a seminary student and even though he’s not gone to college or
gotten any formal training of any sort, he’s been saturated.” This seems to be an exceptional example of a congregation as a theological and mission training center.

The experiences of church planters in theological education and leadership development raised fundamental questions that all in the church need to take seriously. A recent demographic study of Mennonite Church USA (Kanagy, 2008) identified that the top priorities that church members have for the skill set of their pastors is preaching sermons and providing pastoral counseling and care. The pastoral leadership task in a missional frame, however, expects pastors to be more akin to resident theologians focusing their best energies on teaching theology and leadership development. It would appear that the cases of church planting in this study are ahead of the trends in established churches.

Emphasizing the role of pastor as resident theologian in the congregation has implications for both denominational and conference leaders as well as professional pastoral training programs. The church at all levels would benefit from the creation of new partnerships between denominational leaders and theological educators. Is it possible that denominational leaders working with seminary faculties could recover and implement the concept of learning communities for the sake of contextual theological reflection toward the development and implementation of a mature missional ecclesiology? Working together, these leaders could create rich and fertile opportunities for reflexive dialogue that would foster contextual generative learning among leaders of established congregations, leaders of developing congregations, and conference and denominational leaders. The purpose of such events would be to foster a missional imagination at all levels of the church: the congregation, the denominational system, and
the academy. In such learning communities, leaders can be better equipped as theology teachers in the congregation and become skilled in narratological approaches to exegeting their particular contexts of mission.

In the case interviews, the most rich and moving segments of these interviews occurred when church planters were asked to reflect on their own experience. It became apparent that church planters operate at a capacity where there is little time to step back and do this kind of reflection. Reflections in the interview provided significant opportunities for the church planters to discover new learning. In these processes, church planters discovered that they wanted to become less passive about articulating the vision of the congregation. It provided the opportunity for one church planter to begin thinking about financial constraints in terms other than an obstacle. He discovered his own conviction that having his livelihood separated from his leadership position made him a more effective and authentic leader.

The retreat for church planters was the first time in the conference’s history in which the church planters were invited to reflect on their experiences together. As bi-vocational leaders, getting away to attend conventional continuing educational programs provided by the conference is often not possible. By providing a retreat where all expenses were paid and the church planters were reimbursed for lost wages, this event became a priority for the church planters. The evaluation conducted at the end of the retreat revealed that the participants experienced the event not only as educational but also validated their roles as serious rather than quasi-church leaders. The church planters indicated that the corporate reflection that occurred was an important learning experience.
Conference leaders present for the retreat also expressed that significant learning happened for them as well.

These findings raise important questions about how the denomination and conference allocate their resources to support church planting. It may be that most of what church planters need to know about their task is already “within and among” them. Perhaps providing opportunities for reflecting in and on practice is one of the best resources conference leaders can provide (Dall’Alba & Sandberg, 2006; Kolb, 1984). This may, in fact, be a more useful and productive form of learning than formalized church-planting educational delivery systems. This again hearkens back to a growing conviction connected to the findings of the first research question that a denominational missional culture should be structured around a learning function rather than an instrumental function where participants can become “observers of their own thinking” (Senge, 2006, p. 242). In order to better equip church planters to develop common understanding within their developing congregations, denominational, mission agency, and conference leaders would do well to recover and implement the learning community model that was conceived in the denominational planning stages (Flaming et al., 2000).

**Recommendations**

After analyzing the data and summarizing the findings from these cases, a number of recommendations are suggested to bring clarity to the process of church planting in Mennonite Church USA.

**Structural and Organizational Issues**

1. Executive Leadership of Mennonite Church USA should work toward developing a missional organizational culture and systemic alignment by implementing
strategies that are congruent with a missional ecclesiology. Rather than imposing an instrumental approach to systemic alignment focusing on results, denominational leaders should seek to align the system around a narratological learning approach that is focused on the construction of meaning. The mode of such alignment will be generative rather than exploitative learning and the medium will be reflexive dialogue rather than diagnostic discussion.

2. Executive Leadership of Mennonite Church USA needs to affect greater alignment within the denominational system relative to church planting. Executive Leadership should be encouraged to determine what part of the denominational system provides leadership for the part of the denomination’s mission that seeks to “develop missional congregations of many cultures.” The development of new congregations in the 21st century may be more “emergent” than “strategic” in nature. Nevertheless, failing to attend to denominational organizational and structural alignment does not position Mennonite Church USA to fulfill its stated mission. The task of aligning the denominational system or developing missional congregations could be lodged in the office of Executive Leadership, the denominational mission agency, or a consortium of conference-level staff. Wherever it is lodged, systemic alignment will likely not move forward unless Executive Leadership of the denomination determines the process by which that alignment will occur. Executive Leadership of Mennonite Church USA should not wait on other parts of the system to align with the denomination’s mission. This alignment will have direct implications for financial and human resource acquisition and allocation.
3. Denominational and conference leaders should recover the learning community model described in the formational documents of the Mission Transformation Project (Flaming et al., 2000) as the core means of creating systemic alignment for a missional culture. In order to accomplish this task, leaders will need to be convinced of the value of a narratological approach to systemic alignment and educate themselves on the strategies that will foster such an approach. This approach will open important spaces for new expressions of the Mennonite Church to inform the missional perspective the church seeks to embody.

4. Denominational and conference leaders should work together to determine a commonly held organizational understanding of how the denomination and conference relate to each other. Specifically related to the issue of church planting, denominational and conference leaders should articulate and formalize the leadership and services that each is best positioned to offer as well as where the responsibility for a system-wide strategy for church planting ultimately rests.

5. Denominational and conference leaders should determine processes and standards by which they are prepared to engage the vision for developing churches when that vision emerges at the grassroots. This process should include frontloaded dialogue between denominational and/or conference leaders and those who wish to start new churches to explore the congruence of vision based on missional assumptions. Because churches become members of the denomination through membership in a regional conference, the systems of assessment for congruence of vision could also articulate a standardized process for becoming affiliated with a regional conference.
6. Denominational and conference leaders need to develop processes that will enhance their competency to deliver culturally sensitive support and resources. Though it is unlikely that native language literature will be produced for all ethnic/minority groups, it is possible for denominational and conference leaders to develop better understanding of the populations with whom they work.

7. Seminary administrators and faculty are urged to be more alert to missional theology, to seek out more conversation with new Anglo and ethnic Mennonite leaders, offering to these leaders a greater voice in shaping Mennonite theological education.

Theological Commitments and Missional Ecclesiology

8. Denominational and conference leaders should leverage the considerable common theological commitments within the denominational system to develop strategies for increasing positive missional reflection and decreasing anti-missional reflection. One such strategy would surely include resurrecting the learning community concept identified by the framers of the denomination.

9. Denominational and conference leaders should emphasize the biblical-theological significance of three-dimensional hospitality within the denomination. Collecting stories from situations of church planting domestically and internationally that speak to the issue of being hosted by a context could evoke imaginative learning for both developing and existing congregations in thinking about the nature of the church as sent rather than being a rooted institution.

10. Recognizing that the process of adopting a missional ecclesiology is also fundamentally an issue of spiritual formation, denominational and conference leaders should urge the church to pray for renewed understanding. Embodying a new missional
witness will require nothing short of renewal in the church. The church will need to be
led to new forms of hospitality and vocational prayer where the daily prayers of the
church ask God to reveal where God is at work and asking how the church might be
hosted by the context to participate in that work.

Contextual Pressures With Which Church Planters Contend

11. As they observe the emergence of post-Christendom realities,
denominational leaders should inquire of global Anabaptists who have experienced these
realities more acutely and learn how their theology, praxis, and educational programming
have changed as a result.

12. Denominational and conference leaders should embrace the role of social
commentator and become more effective interlocutors between the broad social context
and those who are working in the grassroots. This will require developing greater
competence and sensitivity in understanding how broad social forces are impacting
different subcultures within the nation. By focusing on the tension of the “already” and
the “not yet” understanding of missional thinking, denominational and conference leaders
can investigate opportunities to enhance the positive missional reflection while
decreasing anti-missional reflection among the constituents of Mennonite Church USA.

13. Where providing resources for church planting and mission are concerned,
leaders at every level should embrace a preference for a culture of simplicity, without
becoming simplistic, in seeking common ecclesial understanding in the midst of ever-
growing complexity. Helping people navigate the complexities of the 21st century social
realities is a ministry in itself.
14. Conference leaders should work at developing strong, formalized, and living relationships between established churches and new churches for the sake of prayer support, encouragement, as a context for ongoing leadership development, and as a means of developing deeper missional understanding at all levels of the church.

Role of Church Planters

15. A denominational church-planting strategy for developing missional congregations should frontload the process of starting new churches with carefully articulated theological commitments couched in a missional frame. Carefully articulated centered-set convictions provide significant ballast in the face of a complex task. Centered-set convictions articulated from the start indicate that whatever level of commitment new participants bring the call to faithfulness is the same for all.

16. Conference leaders can provide an immediate and significant resource for leadership development with church planters by validating reflection in and on practice as a core learning strategy for church planters. One-on-one and group experiences for the purposes of reflection in and on practice may be a more beneficial model for leadership development than formal educational programs such as church planter boot camps.

17. Denominational and conference leaders are encouraged to find ways of validating the two key roles that church planters play in their developing congregations: congregation-based theological education and leadership development. Further, validating the role of the church as a theological training center rather than a vendor of therapeutic services can be an important way to sharpen the understanding of missional ecclesiology within the congregation, conference, and denomination.
**Future Research**

1. The identified problem and focus of this study was on church planting. In the course of doing background research it became apparent that considerable confusion exists within the denominational system of Mennonite Church USA. The foundational organizational document for the new denomination, drafted in 2001, outlined a denominational strategy for church planting with specific measurable goals to be met by 2011 (Burkholder et al., 2001). Four years later, in 2005, the delegates to the general assembly adopted a mission statement that was explicit in an intent to “develop missional congregations of many cultures.” It is clear from this study that something happened in the organizational system that arrested the 10-year goals for church planting. Further inquiry could be done to understand the processes that led to the breakdown in the denomination’s mission with regard to church planting and the failure of denominational leadership to affect structural alignment around the church’s stated mission.

2. This study explored the experience of four cases of church planting within one of the 21 regional conferences that make up Mennonite Church USA. It is possible and perhaps likely that all 21 conferences have experiences with church planting and relationships to the denominational structures that differ from the experiences of the cases involved in this study. Conducting more research with cases of church planting in other regional conferences and even across regional conferences would enhance our understanding of the church-planting experience within Mennonite Church USA.

3. Though there is a growing body of research on the experience of church planting among ethnic minority groups, more research is needed to understand the unique situations involved in planting churches among different ethnic groups. Comparing and contrasting effective leadership patterns within and across different ethnic groups would
provide increased competence to all who work at developing systemic church-planting strategy.

4. At the beginning of the 21st century, new paradigms are emerging with regard to mission. Missional ecclesiology has come into its own as a discernable paradigm in the past decades. More research is needed to help denominations, conferences, and congregations understand the process of organizational cultural change. How does culture change happen in the context of the church where one is asking for a change at the level of deeply held values and convictions that may call into question ontological assumptions?

Final Words

This study involved four cases of church planting in one regional conference of Mennonite Church USA at a time when the denomination was struggling to fulfill its mission to develop missional congregations of many cultures. The study described a lack of alignment within the denominational system to adequately support the development of missional congregations. The study found evidence of common theological commitments present among the church plants. There is evidence that the churches being planted reflect some aspects of a missional ecclesiology. There is also evidence that certain anti-missional understandings persist among these church plants. The study further identified the key roles that church planters play in developing common understanding among the members of the fledgling church and in leadership development.

This study contributes to the literature on denominations as organizational cultures and the importance of aligning structure to support mission. The study also contributes to the literature describing the experience of missional church planting in the
complex social environment of 21st-century North America. The findings of this study offer an initial insight into how missional congregations are being developed within Mennonite Church USA at the midpoint of the denomination’s first decade of existence. Finally, this study offers a unique contribution to the research literature by describing the process of church planting from the nexus of organizational change theory, missional ecclesiology, and church-planting strategy.
# APPENDIX A

“CHURCH WITH A MISSION” AND “MISSIONAL CHURCH” PARADIGMS

## Mission Paradigms Compared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Church with a Mission</th>
<th>To Missional Church</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sending</strong></td>
<td><strong>Being sent by God</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission as one among many activities of the church</td>
<td>A missional intention permeating all activities of the church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission as something the church does</td>
<td>Mission through being and doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing persons overseas and the poor and minorities in North America as mission fields</td>
<td>Seeing the dominant cultures in the U.S. and Canada also as mission fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission as “out there”</td>
<td>Mission as “right here” and “out there”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission as cross-cultural; membership recruitment or reclaiming inactive members is something else</td>
<td>Mission within and beyond one’s own culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expecting to have an influential role in society</td>
<td>Expecting to be on the margins of society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to recreate Christendom in a postmodern context</td>
<td>Living as an alternative society in a postmodern, post-Christendom context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking to methodological (or psychological or demographic) solutions</td>
<td>Looking to theological solutions and shifts in world view, as well as practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church-centered mission; church growth is the primary measure of success</td>
<td>Mission centered on the reign of God; the church as instrument of and witness to the in-breaking reign of God in the world, as the church invites others to enter that reign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission agency conducting missionary activities on behalf of congregations</td>
<td>Mission agency seeing local congregations as partners in mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor’s central role as meeting the needs of the community or being chaplain to society</td>
<td>Pastor’s central role as leading and equipping the covenant community in mission in society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken from Barrett (2001) *From church with a mission to missional church*. Unpublished paper presented at the Mennonite Church USA 2001 General Assembly
APPENDIX B

TWELVE INDICATORS OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

1. The missional church proclaims the gospel.

2. The missional church is a community where all members are involved in learning to become disciples of Jesus.

3. The Bible is normative in this church’s life.

4. The church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord.

5. The church seeks to discern God’s specific missional vocation for the entire community and for all its members.

6. A missional community is indicated by how Christians behave toward one another.

7. It is a community that practices reconciliation.

8. People within the community hold themselves accountable to one another in love.

9. The church practices hospitality.

10. Worship is the central act by which the community celebrates with joy and thanksgiving both God’s presence and God’s promised future.

11. This community has vital public witness.

12. There is a recognition that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent
Andrews University
Leadership Program: School of Education

Research Protocol: The Struggle for Common Ecclesiological Understanding among Church Planters and Key Stakeholders: A Qualitative Study of Four Cases

Purpose and Procedures: I am aware that I have been invited to participate in a research project. The purpose of this research is to construct knowledge in the field of church planting. I understand that by participating in this project, I will agree to participate in a two hour focus group interview at the home of Marvin Yoder.

Benefits: I have been told that the benefit of participating in this project will be to receive an outside interpretation of the quality of the working relationship of the church planter and reference council in order to generate a clearer shared vision.

Voluntary Participation: I have been told that refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalties or loss of benefits.

Confidentiality: I have been told that my identity in this study will not be disclosed in any published document.

Compensation: I understand that I will receive no compensation for participating in this study.

Impartial Third Party Contact: I have been told that if I wish to contact my researcher’s advisor or an impartial third party not associated with this study regarding any complaint I may have about this study I may contact:

Dr. Erich Baumgartner
Andrews University
School of Education
Berrien Springs, MI 49104
1-800-471-6210

I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanations given by the investigator. My questions concerning this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this study. If I have additional questions or concerns, I may contact:

David Boshart
3382 305th St.
Parnell, IA 52325
319-646-6004
dboshart@netins.net

Competent Adult Subject:

____________________________  ____________________
Signature of Subject          Date

____________________________  ____________________
Witness                      Date
APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Andrews University

May 15, 2008

David Boshart
3253 305th Street
Parnell, IA 62325

Dear David,

RE: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

IRB Protocol #: 08-049  Application Type: Original  Dept: Leadership
Review Category: Exempt  Action Taken: Approved  Advisor: Erich Baumgartner
Protocol Title: The Struggle for Common Ecclesiological Understanding among Church Planters and Key Stakeholders: A Qualitative Study in Four Cases

This letter is to advise you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved your proposal for research. You have been given clearance to proceed with your research plans.

All changes made to the study design and/or consent form, after initiation of the project, require prior approval from the IRB before such changes can be implemented. Feel free to contact our office if you have any questions.

The duration of the present approval is for one year. If your research is going to take more than one year, you must apply for an extension of your approval in order to be authorized to continue with this project.

Some proposal and research design designs may be of such a nature that participation in the project may involve certain risks to human subjects. If your project is one of this nature and in the implementation of your project an incidence occurs which results in a research-related adverse reaction and/or physical injury, such an occurrence
must be reported immediately in writing to the Institutional Review Board. Any project-related physical injury must also be reported immediately to University Medical Specialties, by calling (269) 473-2222.

We wish you success as you implement the research project as outlined in the approved protocol.

Sincerely,

Michael D Pearson
Administrative Associate
Institutional Review Board

Cc: Erich Baumgartner

Institutional Review Board
(269) 471-6360 Fax: (269) 471-6246 E-mail: irb@andrews.edu
Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355
REFERENCE LIST


Burkholder T., Byler, R., Clemens, D., Harder, J., Martin, M., McFadden, D., Schrag, J., Sommers, K., Stoltzfus, G., & Stuckey, T. (2001). Organizational strategy, culture and organization for Mennonite Church USA. Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Church USA.


Flaming, R., Barrett, L., Green S., Krabill, J., Showalter, R., Suderman, J., & Yoder, D. (2000). *Final report on vision, strategy, and organization of mission agencies for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA (No. 11).* Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.


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VITA

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       Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, VA
1986  B.A., Biblical Studies and Theology
       Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, VA

NON-DEGREE EDUCATION
1995  University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, 1995
       Clinical Pastoral Education; Basic Unit
1995  Iowa Mediation Service, 1994-95
       Mediation Training; 50 hours

WORK EXPERIENCE
1996-Present  Pastor, West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, IA
1999-2000  Bible Instructor, Iowa Mennonite School, Kalona, IA
1989-1996  Pastor, Pleasant View Mennonite Church, Mt. Pleasant, IA
1986-1989  Pastor, Community Mennonite Church, Harrisonburg, VA

PUBLICATIONS
“Re-narrating the Gospel of Sex,” Vision, Elkhart, IN: Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 9(2) 6-12