



Re-Innergized, The Ministry of the Holy Spirit for such a time as this

Stacey Spence-Baldwin

Abstract: This essay explores why the rural church is in decline or dying. This project, “utilized the research method provided by Portland Seminary, at George Fox University, which ‘blended research and design methodology called ‘Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts’. In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using ‘just enough’ feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.” In discovery workshops, one- to-one interviews, design workshops, stakeholder feedback, academic resources, and primarily scripture I identified a key finding; when a church embraces the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it will live again. This finding came from my personal experiences of the Holy Spirit resurrecting three small rural churches which were in decline/death back to life. I will focus the personal stories of these three churches along with the historical, biblical, and current work of the Holy Spirit in reviving what was once dead. My proposal identifies the need of invoking an anointing of the Holy Spirit by the church. My rationale lies in the quantitative and qualitative results of the dying church brought to life through pneumatonic leadership, creativity and innovation, an outward focus, spiritual maturity, church growth, and sustainable vitality.

Keywords: *Holy Spirit • renewal • growth • death • dying • discovery*

Introduction

The pull of the Holy Spirit began to become supremely evident in my call as an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church when I began to serve small rural congregations. As I began to work with the laity of small churches, I saw their commitment to the body of Christ, their commitment to the communities in which they live, and their commitment toward working diligently for the Kingdom of God. I fell deeply in love with the Holy Spirit and its ability to bring life to the church. Yet, as time moved forward, I could sense a feeling of tiredness, maybe even exhaustion among the church members. They seemed to feel the need to be measured by the same standards the larger churches measured themselves: attendance, baptisms, and financial giving. The wisdom of the Holy Spirit has taught me that money and numbers do not make the church a fulfilled body of Christ. Money and numbers may make the church look successful, but fulfillment comes from the deep love for one another, the Holy Spirit, and the community. I have experienced churches who might be low in number and financial resources but have been filled with the Holy Spirit. God’s call for me is to take action to help the declining or ‘dying’ rural church find its ‘re-innergizing’ in the Holy Spirit, not in its number nor financial accumulation. ‘Re-innergizing’ is my own coinage

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which I use here to refer to the Holy Spirit's indwelling in all disciples which sparks the movement of the body of Christ into action. It is in this re-innergized state that churches find provisions for existence through the will of God rather than the will of humanity.

During the first year of my doctoral work, which explored church decline and the Holy Spirit, I took everything I had learned through reading and studying and asked the church to join me in praying for the anointing of the Holy Spirit. We would dream about where the Holy Spirit was leading us and how we could get there. We took a year of prayer to decide what our mission would be to the community. The Holy Spirit led us to open a resource center in collaboration with the local Episcopal church, which, last year (2022), was responsible for the following activity: distribution of over 278,672 lbs. of food; service to 8,373 households, 2,274 disabled persons, 23,138 individuals, and 651 veterans; administering of 364 crisis interventions and the logging of 8,380 volunteer hours. With the Holy Spirit, a church that was in decline is now a church serving in mission to its community in mighty ways - revival is possible, and death is not the only answer. Soon after I received a call to take another church slated for closure. I thought to myself "if the Holy Spirit could do this here, why not there?" I said yes, and the next Holy Spirit journey began. My doctoral project was being lived out in real time. My second church was down to 15 worshippers, behind in payments and just holding on with their fingertips. But the Holy Spirit showed me life in this place. So, we began by praying for the Holy Spirit to re-innergize the church and to show it the way forward. It happened again, and there was new life and a thriving church within three years. The phone rang once again, and it was a call to take a third 'dying' church. I said, "yes." It happened a third time: growth not death. It was empirical proof to me that if a church in decline called upon the Holy Spirit and did what the Holy Spirit told it to do, it would be re-innergized to life and not bound to death.

In this article, I offer reflections on my personal experiences in these rural churches and my journey of the last few years. Specifically, I offer testimony from 'discovery workshops' and in depth-interviews with multiple stakeholders which formed my theoretical grounding, before offering some auto-ethnographic case studies from my time spent in rural ministries. Ultimately, I conclude that a more fulsome embrace of the Holy Spirit away from human tradition can, if done with conviction, offer enormous potential in transforming dwindling congregations.

Church and the Holy Spirit

One cannot argue the rural church¹ is in decline or dying. If you do not believe it, just drive around these communities and see the lack of attendance or, even more alarmingly, the for-sale signs on church buildings. There are numerous reasons for this - population decline, loss of jobs, and other demographic and social changes. Whilst these churches may lack numerical strength, however what we have experienced is that a church of ten can be as powerful as a church of thousands when it is led by the Holy Spirit. On the evidence of this study, there is little doubt the rural church must seek to follow the ultimate paradigm of the scriptural framework of Jesus's life - his teachings and reliance on the Holy Spirit as essential ways of living. This includes exemplifying the Wesleyan use of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason in re-igniting holy living (for the church) in the current culture and context. Without this framework the rural church cannot move past human-made religious traditions which stifle the community of faith and have done irreparable harm to the church since its inception.

In my view, the difference between the church of Acts and the rural church of western culture is that it lacks the presence of the Holy Spirit. Dr. Leonard Sweet puts it that "the church is the body of Christ, but everybody needs breath, air, spirit to be alive. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Christ, the breath of the body. Where the Spirit is missing, the body dies from lack of breath and its lights go out. No light, no life."² It is apparent from stories in scripture that when the Holy Spirit is visible in the body of Christ, wonders, signs, miracles, and healings take place. As we begin to read the story of Jesus, it is at his conception the work of the Spirit takes place. Jesus is guided by the Holy Spirit through his ministry, and the work of the Spirit is seen at the crucifixion and resurrection. That same Spirit given to the disciples allows Peter to heal the beggar, and in the reading of Acts 5:12-27 the revelation that "many signs and

¹ In this context a rural church is defined as a body of Christ located in a rural area with 100 or less members.

² Sweet, Leonard Facebook post December 28 2022 available at <https://www.facebook.com/lensweet/posts/pfbid0GNmwrjt6EH6eog7qu1BVM-Bj6mwiVKincFjcdVCurjv5A3CircPP3xKxvxb5e8Aul> (Accessed February 13th 2025).

wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles”³. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit in Jesus, which has now been given by Christ, to the church in which we find our ability to manifest wonders, signs, and miracles.

God uses the framework in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit to remove obstacles created by the church and set in place the embodiment of the mindset of love. This holy love is the foundation the rural church must claim. Upon claiming holy love, the rural church will set aside stumbling blocks of religious traditions and refuse to use excuses as to why the church cannot reach the community in its context. Then, and only then, will the rural church finally be able to apply Jesus’ method of accepting people and cultures as they are, not what the rural church thinks they should be. These practices of hospitality, anointed by the Holy Spirit, will refocus the rural church toward something I have termed ‘re-innergizing’, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all disciples which sparks the movement of the body of Christ into action. With a focus on the Holy Spirit and Jesus’ commandment to love God and love neighbor, resurrection will begin to take place in the rural church. The intentional action of the rural church (to reignite wonders, signs, miracles, and healings, as seen in Jesus’ ministry) is to pray for an anointing of the Holy Spirit, to find new life in the teachings and model of Jesus the Christ. This new anointing will also allow the rural church to be open to new revelations and new ways of being Jesus in the community. If not, then the rural church will continue to remain what John Wesley feared when he wrote “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”⁴ In other words, a church without the Holy Spirit is rendered more hospice than place of worship - waiting in silence for someone to pull the doors shut.

Exploring the Holy Spirit

David M. Patton in describing the missionary Roland Allen writes that he was “restless about the glaring gap he saw between the church’s stated objective and the conflicting means used to reach those objectives.”⁵ A conflict occasioned by a lack of embrace of guidance from the Holy Spirit and an inevitable decline proceeding from it. The necessity of dependance here is indicated in the church of Acts, specifically Acts 2:37-42 as we are told “repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ [...] and you will receive the Holy Spirit”. This call should motivate us to ask who the Holy Spirit is, and how we might know their work is at hand. The Holy Spirit might be understood as God’s “wholly-other presence.”⁶ A presence that is with God at the time of creation (Gen 1) hovering over the waters as They created. This wholly-other presence is with Ezekial in his vision (Eze. 37), and sets Ezekial in the valley of dried dead bones where God instructs him to speak God’s Spirit to the dead bones for them to rise up. Yet, it is not until the breath of God is poured out to the bones that they truly begin to live and move once again.

When we, the church, experience the movement of the Holy Spirit it is about being “caught up in the sense of the divine, invaded by an outside power with feelings of intense joy and or fear.”⁷ John Wesley described his experience with the Holy Spirit as a strange warm feeling of knowing he was truly forgiven, and the gift of salvation was for him to receive. This is a tradition inherited from Elisha and Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekial, and Joel who all claim the guidance illumination as a gift which came from the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself experiences the Holy Spirit in his baptism, as well as its presence in the wilderness during temptation (Lk. 3: 21-22, Mat. 4:1). Jesus promises it will be sent back to the community. This Holy Spirit is given many names - the Comforter, Helper, Advocate, and Paraclete. The Holy Spirit will live in the lives of believers, offering guidance, strength, and wisdom providing a solid foundation for Christian education and spiritual growth. (Jn. 14:15-31) Paul states in the book of Romans 8:9, “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him”. Conversely, those who don’t have the Holy Spirit are not of Christ. This means that the church can experience the Holy Spirit in supernatural ways which can be quantified. In Acts 2 those who accepted the Holy Spirit’s message were baptized and “about three thousand were added to

³ All biblical references within this article are sourced from the John Wesley Study Bible, CEB version.

⁴ John Wesley, “Works of John Wesley - Vol. 13,” n.d., 639. (London: Wesleyan Book Room, 1872)

⁵ Roland Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit: Selected Writings of Roland Allen* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2006), 6.

⁶ John Eifion Morgan-Wynne, *Holy Spirit and Religious Experience in Christian Literature ca. AD 90-200*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006). 17.

⁷ Morgan-Wynne, 17.

their number that day”⁸, evidence indeed of the power within the Holy Spirit to grow congregations and to grow the church. Without the presence of the wholly-other, church growth, as with every aspect of church, becomes fallible as it is beholden to human design instead of Divine design.

Wesleyan reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit is as significant for the church today as it was for the evangelical revival of the 1800’s. John Wesley’s message of salvation by faith alone alludes to the work of the Holy Spirit in all areas of salvation. Wesley had a deep appreciation for the “the primitive church and the ecumenical creeds which spell out our Triune faith”⁹. In Wesley’s sermon *The Means of Grace II* he taught his followers to “methodically practice the means of grace as the ordinary channels, by which the Holy Spirit conveys, preventing, justifying and sanctifying grace”¹⁰. Mark K. Olson, in his work *John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, highlights the real change this sanctifying process brings.

*“The Spirit enlightens our understanding, rectifies our will and affections, renews our nature, unites us with Christ, assures our adoption as God’s children, guides our actions [and] purifies and sanctifies our souls and bodies for the purpose of full and eternal enjoyment of God.”*¹¹

It is in this context that my discovery workshops and one-on-meetings sought to answer the question, where is the Holy Spirit in the church?

Discovery Workshops

My research employed two primary means of data collection. The first of these was the leading of ‘discovery workshops’ to test my theories. Discovery workshops are opportunities for the researcher to gather stakeholders together and to sift through the experiences and knowledge of others to gain a better understanding of the topic being explored. Crucially, discovery workshops differ from focus groups in not simply asking questions and gathering responses but in delving deeper, collectively, into *why* an answer is. In other words, what experiences make the answer a “yes or no.” Since Covid was prominent at this time, I conducted the first workshops via Zoom in two two-hour sessions. My stakeholders consisted of seven individuals:

- Full Time Elder in the Baptist Church
- Retired Professional from social sector/congregant
- IT Professional from local university/congregant
- Director of Worship from a local rural church
- Congregant/Friend
- Local Community Teacher and congregant
- Community Member, Congregation Member, PhD., Retired Professional

Within the research tools for the discovery workshops was a SWOT analysis - a list of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, which would operate as the catalyst to determine SWOT’s to the rural church. Then the stakeholders participated in the ‘Five Way Exercise’, as we considered the most pressing conclusions from the SWOT and identified the one area of immediate focus. Additionally, stakeholders completed an ‘Empathy Map’, an exercise which involves identifying an outcome before attempting to think about how this might be perceived when delivered – in this instance what a rural church might say, think, do, and feel when being ‘re-innergized’.

At the same workshop the stakeholders were given pre-written scenarios and asked to discuss how they saw the Holy Spirit at work. As the stakeholders began to see the Holy Spirit at work in these stories they began to talk about their own experiences with it. The participants began to talk about the difference between choices they had

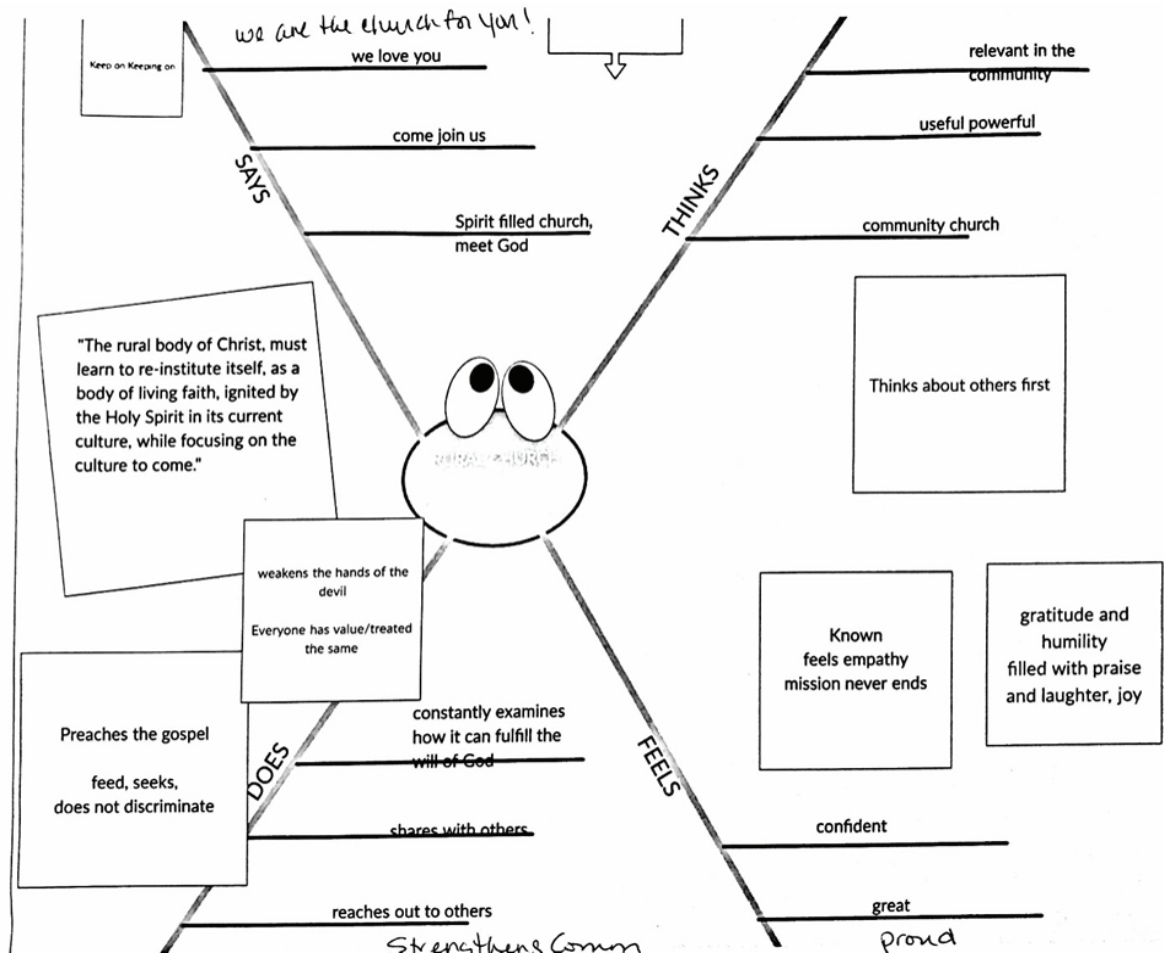
⁸ Allen, 6.

⁹ Mark K. Olson. “John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit.” *Wesleyscholar.com*. September 14, 2019. John Wesley’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit – wesleyscholar.com. July 19, 2024.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP EMPATHY MAP



made against instances they felt a movement of the Holy Spirit. One participant described that it was only when reflecting back that they realized "what was happening was a movement of the Holy Spirit". Some relayed stories of how others had doubted them and written their ideas off, only for them to ultimately succeed. Many more still shared that they had never been asked to articulate the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and that it was refreshing to be able to reflect. This furthered confidence in my hypothesis that the Holy Spirit re-energizes the hearts of believers when we recognize its work in us and in the church.

The group then took a few days to consider our time together. I was keen to get their help in shaping my thinking further, so asked them to respond to the following questions: "What am I missing?" and "What do I need to study that is not on here?". One of the questions which emerged through this process was "what will it take to transform church leadership and community culture so that tradition does not become the polarizing force of traditionalism?" In addition, it was through the discovery workshop that I learned I would need to narrow down my research topic, yet have it state the same thing. I had devised a project statement through my work, but some perceived a "wordiness" was not succinct enough to draw attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. This was brought into focus as the stakeholders helped me consider its framing.

After synthesizing all the information brought forth by the stakeholders, the following was identified: the greatest weakness of the rural church is a lack of leadership, of the Holy Spirit, and a persistence of church conflict.

The greatest threats are traditions, biases, and a lack of cultural intelligence within the Church. The traditions represent the frozen in time arbitrary rules and regulations - such as no coffee in the sanctuary for example. The bias of who should be in church and what they wear. "Do they have tattoos?". Why wouldn't they? The lack of knowledge of the culture in which the church exists neglects an understanding of your community, its needs, and its people. The greatest threat to the church is its inability to be flexible in terms of what it means to welcome people other than themselves. Its strength, however, is its desire to be known in the community as a witness and a healer. After our sessions we produced the following project statement -

"Considering the rural church, we discovered that the rural body of Christ must learn to re-institute itself as a body of living faith ignited by the Holy Spirit in its current context and focused on the culture to come, a situation which is caused by traditions that have become traditionalized. If this need were met, the rural church would be known in the community as witnesses and healers"

One-to-One Interviews

After our discovery groups I initiated in-depth interviews with four participants to further probe themes that had arisen. Interviewees (A, B, C, and D) received the discovery workshop statement and outcomes and were asked to respond to the following questions: "What am I missing?" and "What do I need to study that is not on here?"

A, an author and retired clergy/professor, noted the importance of focusing on the cause and effect of the hollowing out of the local economy by Big Agriculture, traditionalists, social issues experienced in rural communities that are foreign to other parts of society, and social civil 'religion'. Interviewee A specifically discussed social class structure, which in turn resembles the religious organizational structure that institutes human-made religious traditions. A stated "the experience of class can be seen in terms of rituals [traditions] of inequality [...]"¹² this means the upper class [upper hierarchy of the body of Christ] people give orders and the lower-class [lower hierarchy in the body of Christ] take the orders, then the middle class [middle hierarchy of the body of Christ] give and take orders."¹³ One could say at times the church behaves much as the world does. As Allen Hirsch states, "This model of organization is not biblical. Instead, it is "fatalistic and self-serving, because the goal is fixed and preserves the institution for as long as possible"¹⁴, instead of the focus being to follow Jesus onto the mission field for the purpose of fulfilling the great commission."¹⁵

B, a writer and professor, addressed the importance of what the rural church is already doing well, the need to fix power structures, and the rural church's resistance to incarnational freeing of the Holy Spirit.

C, a writer, professor, and clergyman identified the need to embrace culture at every level and to connect to the digital world. C described the importance of "sharing and inviting stories to be told through all means, including social media components to reach the "TGIF (Twitter, Google, Insta-gram, Facebook)" userbase."¹⁶ In addition, they emphasized that in every context there is a language - "every culture has its own language and learning to read those languages is semiotics."¹⁷ The Holy Spirit is the perfecter of our ability to understand these times we live in.

D, a clergy member and District Leadership, noted that lack of leadership causes rural churches to become traditionally inward instead of outwardly focused. D stated, without the Holy Spirit forming the pastor and laity the body of Christ may become inward focused, unable to recognize their Holy Spirit given gifts for mission. In turn, this

¹² Tex Sample, *Blue Collar Resistance and the Politics of Jesus: Doing Ministry with Working Class Whites* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006). Kindle, loc. 182. Sample rightly asks "why is class relevant? Just as it works in the world so too does it work in the church. Those with the money or most influence makes the rules".

¹³ Ibid., 182.

¹⁴ Hirsch, 186-187.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Preach The Story*, Vlog, 2020, <https://preachthestory.com/>.

¹⁷ Michael Adam Beck and Leonard Sweet, *Contextual Intelligence* (Oviedo, FL: HigherLife Publishing, 2021), 50.

allows for “isms and schisms to create division among the body of Christ¹⁸” and in the culture. These churches tend to focus on freedom-liberty and then on the gospel, instead of the other way around.

Both the discovery workshop and one-to-one interviews confirmed to me a parallel thought process, though the workshop indicated a “big picture” narrative, and the one-to-one interviews pin-pointed detailed identifiers in rural church decline. The findings were as follows:

- The presence of the Holy Spirit must be seen in the leadership and the body of Christ. This is shown through the agape love mindset of Jesus the Christ.
- The rural church and community will need to address its polarized insight into tradition, politics, and cultural norms. In other words, faith in the Holy Spirit cannot give way to the faith of human reason,
- Socioeconomic status must be kept in mind when addressing the healing and witness to the community. Dominance of one group of people over another is not the economic posture in the mission of Jesus; all are welcome, and all are equal,
- It will take an ability to look beyond the “inerrant” word of God to embrace the story of Jesus. As Sweet puts it, “reread the story of Jesus from a new vantage point, not so we can stockpile and be selfish, but so we can reach out to others in healing, kindness, and service¹⁹”.
- That the rural church does not need to be a big church to be Jesus in its community. The rural church should not have its vitality compared with medium or large churches. This type of comparison degrades the value of what rural churches are doing in mission within their own context. Churches are currently evaluated on attendance, baptism, and affirmations of faith. Based on location alone, most rural churches will not have as many baptisms or members joining as larger churches. No church should be considered the same as another; they are not cookie-cutter institutions and should not be evaluated based on the performance of other churches. The rural church has been held to a standard which it cannot achieve, nor was it designed to. This is why the rural church has withdrawn; because it has not been free to be who it is called to be.

From all my data collection the conclusion emerges that the rural church has lost its momentum in its ability to foster a culture of innovation and creativity through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. One reason for the loss of momentum is due to the unrealistic expectations set by larger denomination of the United Methodist Church, (herein referred to as denomination/s). Rural churches are not the same as medium sized or large churches. They have a different context and culture and a different understanding of how their faith life should be lived out. For example, larger churches can provide missions in a larger context of feeding more people, visiting a larger number of prisoners and fundraising more money for service focused non-profits within the same area. These larger denominations have all too often lacked maintenance of close relationships with smaller churches. This is evidenced through the limited opportunities smaller churches have to be at conferencing tables within the body of Christ. Cross denomination events are rarely, if ever, scheduled to take place at small churches, and it is further rare for Bishops or District Superintendents to visit the small rural church. When denominations create learning opportunities it is geared towards large churches, suburban and urban contexts. From my own experience in urban and suburban church contexts, parishioners have the fortune of not experiencing school closures because the county does not want to put money in them, mom and pop’ stores closing because of chains stores engulfing the area, and big agriculture coming in and taking over family farms or putting family farms out of business. The sociological factors of churches in a rural setting are completely different than in urban or suburban areas. This fact has been lost in the process of appointing leadership in these churches within the denomination. Small churches have been assigned pastors out of a desire to fill the vacancy rather than suitability for the role and the congregation. Instead of all of the above, the denomination as a whole must find the value of a small church and live to help sustain this part of the vine.

Small groups of gathered people are the origin of our Methodist movement. The first small group we read about is the Holy Club, in which Charles and John Wesley gathered for reading, prayer, discussion, and accountability with other young men. These meetings emphasized “the desire to live a Christ-like life, the value of small groups and good organization, the rhythm of public worship and private prayer, the call to serve to the neediest and the power of

¹⁸ Rev. Mary Mitchell, “Discovery Workshop,” November 8, 2021.

¹⁹ Beck and Sweet, 24.

the spoken and printed word to change hearts and minds²⁰. Methodism began to grow by replicating these types of small and organized groups. These groups eventually grew into classes and bands which were smaller, organized ways of growing in works of piety and mercy. Whilst large group worship would develop later the heart of Methodism was grown and sewn in small group settings where the Holy Spirit was present and active through the Body of Christ. It is this small group setting I will turn to next, utilizing what I have established as the Pneumanautical Wheel to draw out my experiences in three rural churches in North Central Florida. As shall be seen, an embrace of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is essential for revival. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

Re-Innergizing

Each church has its own ecosystem. The Holy Spirit is the only one who can navigate and re-innergize those individual systems. Therefore, one of the most important tools for re-innergizing is a spiritual leader who recognizes the need to seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit and apply it to the culture of the church and the context of the community. What follows is the work of the Holy Spirit in three churches which were in serious decline or dying and then experienced resurrection. Below is the “Pneumanautical Wheel”, an illustration I put together which demonstrates how centering on the Holy Spirit affected six areas of growth within the Body of Christ. First, it is noted that re-innergizing begins with one or more Holy Spirit focused individuals coming together in prayer, asking for an anointing of the Spirit of God in the body and in the missions of the church. What flowed from prayer was a focus on innovative and creative ways to reach out into the community such as dinner churches, horse show church’, and family fun nights. Once the church began doing new and different things other people began to volunteer, and a greater outward focus began to develop. This means, the church realized that an outward mission focus was bringing new life to the traditional church. The next step in Christian maturity began with those same volunteers as they wanted to connect with their faith on a deeper level. The church had greater attendance in bible studies, worship, fellowship, and retreats. What followed this growth was the number growth of the church as a whole which further bought forth financial stability. All of this came through inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit to take hold of us individually and collectively as the church.

The wheel also expresses the evolution of churches once the church placed the Holy Spirit at the center of its mission and ministry. The notches indicate the areas in which the churches in this study grew as they began to work with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This means no ministry or mission began unless it began with prayer asking the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction.



Spence, Stacey. 2022. "Pneumanautical Wheel."

²⁰ The Methodist Church, "A Short History of the Holy Club," available at <https://www.wesleysoxford.org.uk/people/holy-club/what-was-the-holy-club> (Accessed 17th February 2025)

Sparr United Methodist Church

When I met with the church council and walked the grounds of Sparr I felt the Holy Breath of God blow over and around me. I instantly knew God was not done with this Body of Christ. Through the discerning power of the Holy Spirit I saw life in what others saw as dry, dead bones. I prayed for leaders who would join me in the re-innergizing work of the Holy Spirit. It would take two months for me to meet Rev. Jackie Beard. I heard him play and sing at a church event, and I knew he was key to the renewal of Sparr. So, I went up to him, introduced myself, and said "The Lord has called you to help revive this [Sparr] church." To my delight, he came to visit the church the following week. He is an integral part of the mission and ministry in this church. He was the first of the Holy Spirit leaders the Lord brought forward.

However, when a church is in decline and the power of the Holy Spirit blows through it, those in the church can be affronted. Sometimes, it is the natural inclination of the declining church to withhold its gifts and graces instead of using the last of them for the community. But Sparr UMC thought differently, it began a dinner church in collaboration with two other rural churches. The church began to look outward into the community even though it was facing its own scarcity. Sparr's change in its focus came because it had courageous, "pneumanaulical" leaders moving the church to what it could be instead of what it might be. This term, coined by Sweet, describes disciples who are "sailors" of the Holy Spirit. They sail where the Holy Spirit takes them, and they bring others along with them. "Pneumanauts" are gifted leaders who use their gifts for the edification of the church and community. It is imperative that the gifts meet the mission. In other words, do not put a round peg in a square hole. If the church does not have the pneumanauts with the proper gifts for the mission, then the church may need to rethink its mission. The wisdom to know the difference between the round peg and the square hole is important, because if we keep trying at something we are not gifted for failure is not a learning tool, it is just a punishment. Then we give up and lose hope.



Outward Focus - Instead of losing hope, Sparr sought through prayer to determine what their mission would be in the community. Sparr decided to meet the Holy Spirit at Lakes and Meadows dinner church. This dinner church was not planted to grow the rooted church, to fill its pews, or to increase its budget - it was birthed to love others in the name of Jesus the Christ. The inward focus of Sparr continued to change by entering the community and supporting the schools and local community initiatives and by inviting other churches to community through worship and events. It began a Fall fiesta with a trunk-or-treat (a Halloween event where the church has the children go from car to car where the trunks of the cars are decorated, and candy is given out) in order to share love with the community. The Sparr church had always had a small food pantry, but with the start of dinner church, the decision was made that it would be better to use the food from the pantry to distribute there. As a result, Sparr leveraged its resources and began to make relationships with community members, share in baby showers, participate in funerals of local people and celebrate holidays with the community. All of this allows the church to have a greater impact in Lakes and Meadows. Every year this church provides names of local children for the church's Angel Tree²¹. This gathering of names is accomplished in connection with local schools to ensure the church is lifting its community. This outward movement has led this church to help other churches that are declining or dying. Sparr has helped other churches financially, holding special community events, and praying for struggling churches and their communities. This is the picture of a church that cares more about its community than it cares about itself. This is pneumanaulical leading.



Innovative Creativity - Sparr has a monthly horse show. Yes, a horse show. Sparr is situated in what is called "horse country," and much of the area's recreational activity revolves around riding horses. It is not, therefore, the most outlandish idea - it is innovative and creative. This horse show has taken place at the

²¹ The Angel Tree sees families within a needy community give the church the names of their children and their ages, whilst the church puts these names on a Christmas tree in the church. Congregation members then pick a name and buy gifts for that family member and a week before Christmas the gifts are delivered to the families in the community.

church in the last 40 years. However, when I began to pastor this church, the focus of the horse show was more about making money to sustain the status quo than reaching the community. It would take a year of prayer before the Holy Spirit would move in this ministry. First, The Table of Blessing was created by the Men of Purpose (our men's ministry). This was the table to which all would be invited to come and eat. It is a donation-only meal, and you come whether you have money to pay or not. This change of focus has led us to being better hosts to the community through inviting conversation and getting to know the riders, parents, judges, and trainers. This has allowed the horse show to be grafted into the established church by the fresh new wind of the Holy Spirit. Change here took work. Some people left the church because of it, and others stopped volunteering. This is what happens sometimes when the Holy Spirit is present. People leave, and we must remember that this is ok. When the movement of the Holy Spirit is felt, it can sometimes bring fear and confusion to others. We see this fear and confusion in Acts 2 where the church community thought believers were drunk at 9am. When the church is moved by the Holy Spirit it will inevitably be called to be with people who are marginalized. This can expose reservations amongst those people who are comfortable. There are some who are not ready for a deeper level of faith when the presence of the Holy Spirit leads and guides. Pneumanautical leaders keep moving forward with those who are ready, while always remaining present for those who are not. Our work is to wait on the breath of the Holy Spirit to move forward.

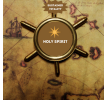


Spiritual Maturity - When the breath of the Holy Spirit re-innergizes you, you will naturally move to a deeper level of spirituality. You will seek to know more about God and your story within God's story. Sparr church wants to experience the Holy Spirit in deeper and more meaningful ways. Instead of hunkering down with its resources, the focus now is on where we are going next and how we can use what we have. The church takes our worship seriously on Sunday mornings. We are now open to new songs and a blended style of worship, and we have a multi-racial congregation. Discipleship has a stronger focus on equipping the saints for ministry. Equipping the saints means that all people are encouraged to find and use their Holy-Spirit-given gifts for the church first. Equipping the saints to follow the Holy Spirit is the fuel from which all missions and ministry are born, regardless of the cost.

Sparr church takes risks and is not afraid to fail. There are times when new ministries do not succeed. This is ok, because we have learned what will not work, and we are one step closer to what will work. Spiritual maturity for Sparr UMC means that we are not afraid to take the leap of faith in the name of Jesus. Living without fear has allowed Sparr to go from descending to ascending.



Church Growth - I was appointed to Sparr UMC in 2017. There were about 15 worshippers on a Sunday morning and a Bible study on Wednesday nights. There was approximately \$2,000 in operating funds and \$7,000 in the credit union account. The horse show account, which was separate, had about \$5,000. The church had not paid for its apportionments or its insurances in three years. This meant the church was in debt of approximately \$10,000. We were in trouble, with little help from receiving enough donations or offerings to keep the doors open. There was infighting about whether the horse show funds should be set as a designated fund account, among many other futile arguments over the upkeep of the church premises. It would, I think, have been forgivable to have seen this project as forgone. But, with God and the presence of the Holy Spirit, anything is possible. One day, a member of the church came in and needed help with a personal electric bill. The amount needed was \$200. This was all the church had available in the account to give. So, I told the financial secretary to send a cheque to the electric company. Later that day when I came back to the church for a meeting, in a white envelope on the secretary's desk were two one-hundred-dollar bills. I was told that shortly after I had left, a gentleman came by the church and wanted to give the church an offering. He was not from the area. He just felt the need to stop his car and to give financially to Sparr. It was the first of many Holy Spirit moments which would re-innergize this church to claim the prompting of the Holy Spirit.



Sustained Vitality - Five years later, we have over 40 worshippers in our little sanctuary. New worshippers came from all areas of the community. Some of new people were Christians already, but not attending church, and another set were knowing believers introduced to the church by the people already attending. We did have some church hoppers, but the number was not significant. New people were interested in the church because of what the church was doing inside the community. We receive enough in the offering to pay operating expenses and have \$34,000 in designated funds which are for community mission. Our insurance and apportionments are paid and up to date. Maintaining facilities is a priority. The horse show and the Table of Blessings are thriving. We are now focused on building a community, not a bigger bank balance. We have built a team of saints who draw from the Holy Spirit through prayer, and all ministries are laity led. When saints draw from the Holy Spirit, it enables the pastor to focus on building up the saints and sending them forth with permission and support.

Ultimately, sustainability only comes from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. The church must have its ear inclined to its message and then answer its call. When the focus of the church is the re-innergizing of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ will live out their vows of being present in the church and community, giving of their gifts, offering their prayers, being in service to the church and community, and sharing their witness of what God has done in their lives.

First Hawthorne United Methodist Church



Dunamis Saints - Hawthorne was my first senior pastor appointment. When I finished my first Sunday I cried because I could not imagine putting another sermon together for the following Sunday, all the while managing the church. The gift I was given at Hawthorne were saints who were and are mature in faith. But, like most small churches, they were tired of trying to live up to unrealistic expectations set by the denomination.

I had come from a large church setting where everything was big and grand. Now, I was in a rural church setting where everything was hands-on. In other words, there was no money to pay staff to do the work. Where there is a lack of staff, the pastor is solely responsible to equip the laity for mission and ministry, until laity step forward to help. Relying on the prompting of the Holy Spirit in the work of equipping saints is critical. I needed to prayerfully begin to lead and equip others through the discernment of the Holy Spirit. Nothing was more important.

The Holy Spirit began to move in me by opening my eyes to the ministry of this church. Our membership was at about 40 (though the rolls said 107), and I could easily identify ninety percent of the congregation who were on mission in the community. In my experience, I have not heard of one large church who can say they have ninety percent of their congregation in mission. The thought of this caused an awakening of my heart. I felt nothing less than gratitude and thankfulness for the small churches who have clung to hope and faith to carry on even during decline.

I knew that if I were to influence systematic change within the denomination regarding small churches, we needed to awaken the denomination to the incredible mission and ministry already being done by small churches in decline. I began to invite other denominational leaders to witness this. It was a wonderful moment when our Bishop, Rev. Ken Carter, came to Hawthorne to preach and to anoint the Hawthorne Area Resource Center (HARC) for the work that the Holy Spirit had already begun. Over the next months and years, the church district began to find space for small churches. A group of Holy Spirit driven pastors began the Rural Church Network whose mission was to connect rural churches with other small churches, to collaborate in ministry in new ways, and to go into the community cultivating new ministry. Hawthorne has been on the front of the Rural Ministry Network, providing space for the Holy Spirit to move the ministry, but to move in new and fresh ways through the blended ecology of the church.



Outward Focus - Hawthorne has always been a church in the community. Its members serve in many governmental functions within the city and are active in the schools. This church decided to take a leap of faith with the HARC. Today, this church continues to be at work in the local schools, the Women's Club, the thrift store, Community Garden, and through the NOMADS²². The NOMADS come to this church because its focus is work in the community. All of this ministry is sustained with forty people. I am reminded of the words of Paul in Colossians, "For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me" (Col 1:29 NRSV).



Innovative Creativity - Hawthorne, while active in the community, is a church which enjoys working with other organizations. This means, our strength lies in not re-creating the wheel. Over the last seven years, Hawthorne has had many of its members pass away. Like everyone else we have gone through Covid. Some members have left and gone to other churches, and our numbers have dwindled. So right now, Hawthorne is in a season of transition, and sometimes it can be difficult to be innovative and creative when things are changing. Though many would see this as the end, the Holy Spirit uses dwindled attendance as a new beginning for innovation and creativity. Innovation and creativity are springing up in places and in people who have not stepped forward until now. During the pandemic, our tech team spent hours figuring out how, on a tight budget, to begin to stream services. We managed to preach from the porch of a local house. The congregation could sit in their cars at the church and see and hear, or they could pull a chair out and enjoy the weather. Thanks to the creativity of the tech team (composed of two people) we now have over 200 viewers of our online service which began in 2020 and continued to today. Additionally, Hawthorne, with its limited resources, has come alongside another small church in danger of closure to help with paying for their pastor, operational expenses, and facilities upkeep. Hawthorne sees this as an innovative way to express our connection as churches. What we have learned is that with the Holy Spirit, a time of transition does not mean a time of drought. It means full reliance on the movement of the Holy Spirit.



Spiritual Maturity - Hawthorne has always had a deep commitment to maintaining spiritual maturity. It is an important part of the church's faith walk. However, with such a focus on mission to the community and the pandemic, we have backslid in our discipleship. There are times when a church can be so innovative and creative in the community that it can misplace service/mission as inward growth. In other words, we are so focused on others that we forget to focus on ourselves. Today, the church is back to a weekly Bible study called Slice of Heaven. The women are meeting in a unit group, a group meets for the Wired Word, a discussion of current world topics on Sunday mornings, and we continue to establish personal devotion and study time. We have begun to plan for youth activities and now have children's moments in worship. Our recovery is a work in progress, not an end. We rely on the words which come from the Apostle Paul, "He told me, My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness [...] I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness [...] I just let Christ take over! And so, the weaker I get, the stronger I become" (1 Cor 12:10 The Message).

There are times when the church is in realignment. This condition is not a handicap but a gift, because in its weakness God will make the church strong again.



Church Growth - When the church is in decline, it is difficult to be forward thinking, especially when six air conditioning units and three roofs need replacing. Yet, Hawthorne has done just that. It has focused

²² NOMADS are a mission on action in divine service. NOMADS "provide volunteer labor for historically Methodist organizations and demonstrate God's love" through "work and by listening to the people with whom we work". They engage in "new construction, remodeling, and repairs for churches, children's homes, camps, colleges, outreach missions and disaster rebuilding". See NOMADS: [NOMADS \(methodistnomads.org\)](http://methodistnomads.org)

on stewardship of its buildings and its grounds during this time. This type of decision making only comes with the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is preparing this place for that. It is not seeking to close its doors.



Sustained Vitality - Ultimately, sustainability only comes from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit and the church must have its ear inclined to its message and then answer its call. When the focus of the church is the re-innergizing of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ will live out their vows of being present in the church and community, giving of their gifts, offering their prayers, being in service to the church and community, and sharing their witness of what God has done in their lives. This is a recurring theme for a re-innergized church.

Pine United Methodist Church

Pine was the third church placed on my circuit. Already 140 years old, Pine is one of the oldest churches in our area. It has been moved, closed, and reopened over the years. Pine was the same type of appointment as Sparr. I was to go in to see if there was life within the church. I began at Pine in July of 2021, a few months after Covid hit. Like all other churches during the Covid pandemic, the ministry was not firing on all cylinders. Attendance was low, money was tight, and the mission was almost non-existent. Moreover, the congregation was mourning the loss of its long-term pastor. The interim pastor had left quickly, and another new pastor had been appointed. All this to say, they were in an uncertain place and time.



Dynamis Saints - When we are in an uncertain place and time, we need resurrection - a resurrection which is “not a dumpster but a recycling bin.”²³ Resurrection begins when we can empty ourselves, like Jesus, “taking on the position of vulnerability,”²⁴ for our community. We must ask ourselves, “Do we cry for our zip code, and do you love your people enough to pray for them while they hang you on the cross²⁵?” Pine answered “yes” to these questions. Pine has Holy-Spirit-filled leaders. Yet sometimes, because of fear of failure, it is hard for those leaders to step out in faith. Pine needed a pneumatist who would give them permission to fail and then move on. Failure can be good because it means we have tried. A Holy Spirit filled leader will move the church to try all things for the sharing of the gospel. Pine also needed a pastor who could speak truth to their circumstances. I needed to have hard, Holy Spirit driven conversations regarding conflict, money, and mission all of which were stifling the growth of the church. These conversations led to the development of, what I would term, dy-no-mite laity leaders - individuals who had decided they wanted to be the change needed for the church. It is upon the foundations of these kinds of conversations that the church continues to be re-innergized.



Innovative Creativity - Conversations with the community have helped Pine begin its dive into discerning new ways of innovation and creativity. These new ways take time to develop and adjust from the way we have always done things to the new way we are going to do them. We have learned that we cannot rely on our own time. During innovation and creation it is on the Holy Spirit's time. The first step in creativity for this church was to look at their yearly rummage sale to build relationships with the community and not as an income producer to pay the bills. This shift of focus was fully embraced and had a profound impact on the congregation and the community. Instead of a cost for a certain item it became a matter of donation only. You are welcome to shop even if you have no money. In addition, conversations began to focus on one another rather than on the items in the rummage sale. During the first year of this shift in thought the church doubled its financial intake, and in the second year the church tripled it. When the church provides activities for relationship building God blesses these relationships. Pine has

²³ Beck and Sweet, 55.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

begun to be creative in new ways as it collaborates with other churches in Bible studies, dinner church, and worship events. It is currently being re-innergized in cultivating new ways it can reach the community through Lakes and Meadows Dinner Church.



Outward Focus - Once Covid restrictions were lifted, Pine decided it wanted to help with dinner church at the Lakes and Meadows. Lakes and Meadows is a community which reflects differing social statuses. It is a community which has many needs, but the most important need it desires is to be loved. It is what is called a “sore community²⁶” – an area suffering from food insecurity, drug addiction and homelessness, and where many needs which are not being met. A few members from Pine began to bake dessert for the dinner church and take it over once a month. Within a couple of months Pine began to give more of their personal time to this mission. Today, two years later, this church has monthly participants in this ministry. They now provide dinner, dessert, and fellowship to the people of this community. Ironically, Lakes and Meadows is in the same community where Pine is located. One of our members told me they had no idea Lakes and Meadows existed. Sometimes the Holy Spirit awakens our eyes to what is already before us. This is re-innergizing. Additionally, Pine has joined in the mission work with Sparr regarding Samaritan’s Purse Shoeboxes²⁷. The church is part of the community wide choir and fifth Sunday “sings”, those who gather for worship and praise in all surrounding areas of the community. This church is also involved in providing basic hygiene supplies for children who live in the area called the Forest. Pine now looks for ways it can meet the Holy Spirit where it is already at work. Pine church is a spiritually mature church, a church with a sense of humor, and a church which loves its community. All it needed was someone to show them where they could go to serve.



Spiritual Maturity - A spiritually mature church is a church with a sense of humor. In other words, it’s a laughing church. Pine loves to laugh. This is where I, as the new pastor, began to build relationships with the Pine congregation. There are times when the Holy Spirit must bring laughter before the church can experience joy in the work of mission and ministry. Pine finds its spiritual maturity in its relationship with each other and its community. They are a loving congregation who enjoy spending time with one another. Even though some of our congregation live part-time in Florida, they are never separated from the love of their Florida church. Pine still needs to carve out time for discipleship of their own through a focused Bible study and other ways of pursuing sanctified grace. I am confident that the Holy Spirit will lead and guide us in this path as well. However, right now laughter and joy need to come before being ready for a deeper faith life. Pine congregants are spiritually mature in their ability to invite and welcome others, and they are gifted in hospitality and humor. It is upon this gift that the church and its community will be re-energized.



Church Growth - In less than two years, Pine’s attendance went from 15-20 to 30-35. This may seem like a small increase to most churches, but for Pine it is significant given its previous situation. During my first two months a review of the budget and bank account confirmed that the church had enough operating capital for three months. I recall the meeting when we announced to the church our financial condition and where I told them we needed to find a mission in the community - now. I also asked, “Do we want to close the doors just to pay bills or to do ministry?” This is when we began helping with Lakes and Meadows dinner church.

Since Pine has many members who live in two states, I wrote a letter to all the church members and visitors. The leadership of the church was honest about the condition of the finances and encouraged them to give. During another meeting one of the leaders told me that “my letter was a bit forward”, and I replied that “the letter matches

²⁶ A “sore community” is a term used by Vernon Foster, who started the “Dinner Church Collective.” It means a community which lacks resources and suffers from food insecurity.

²⁷ The shoe box program is part of a larger organization which packs shoe boxes with toys and gifts for children all around the world for Christmas.

the state of the church". I reflect on these interactions, because it is important to know we are meeting the Holy Spirit where it is at work. We do not just sit and watch, but we are active participants in the Holy Spirit's work. We are the hands, feet, and head of Jesus in the world, and this mission requires hard work on our part. Within those three months giving increased, and our mission work continued to increase. Today, we have over \$30,000 in the bank and have paid \$26,000 for a new roof. We are currently praying about where we will use this money in the ministry to the community. The value of what Pine has does not lie in the money in the bank or the butts in the pews. It lies in the re-innergizing of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of its people.



Sustained Vitality - Ultimately, sustainability only comes from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, and the church must have its ear inclined to its message and then answer its call. When the focus of the church is the re-innergizing by the Holy Spirit of the body of Christ it will live out its vow of being present in the church and community - giving of gifts, offering of prayers, being in service to the church and community, and sharing witness of what God has done in the lives of their people.

Conclusion

The foundation of re-innergizing the rural church begins with traditional formational practices of Jesus through the working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. The Holy Spirit is proclaimed by Wesley through his sermons as the one who "awakens our spirit to the condition of sin, it provides us the miracle of new birth, leads us to a holy life, gives the church supernatural gifts, offers the assurance of salvation, and [fills us] with the Holy Spirit so that we may be the living portrait of Christ in this world²⁸". This is modeled by Jesus in scripture. These practices focus on allowing the Holy Spirit to guide and lead the church and in doing so addressing polarizing human traditions of the church. Instead, we are offered a consistent mind-set of love, and a methodology of identifying the cultural context of the community it serves. Just as Jesus did, the church needs to recall the Holy Spirit's activity in the primitive church. The activity of the church to be able to "walk in the Holy Spirit, live by it, and cry out for it²⁹". Also to remember that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, which manifests the work gifts and the work given to the church by God, which directs the "mission and internal movements of the church."³⁰

Within the context of the Holy Spirit directing the internal movement of the church, Jesus speaks directly to the improper use of tradition as a model of religious holiness: "You have let go of the commands of God and the holding on to the human tradition [...] your own traditions [...] nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down"(Mark 7:8-9). The church is warned in Mark 7:8, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition". In Galatians 4:3, "So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world"³¹ - how humanized religious tradition holds the rural church impotent. Tom Rainer, former President and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, speaks to a traditionalized church as being a fortress where everything is held inside the walls and nothing goes out into the community.³² Allen Hirsch argues we do not delve deeply enough to honestly answer questions, to reignite old traditions in new and fresh ways. Ultimately, synthesizing human religious traditions "destroys the unique and liberating power of new faith in Christ."³³

Jesus speaks to new faith in the mind-set of love in Matthew 22:36-40; "You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind [...] and, you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). Richard Rohr indicates this type of love mindset only comes from an inward awakening through the Holy Spirit³⁴. Again, the Book of Ezekiel speaks of the valley of dry bones and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring new life

²⁸ John Wesley, "Awake, Thou That Sleepest," "Scriptural Christianity," "The more Excellent Way," The Witness of Spirit, Discourse I and II." *Wesleyan Center Online*. 1999. The Wesley Center Online (nnu.edu). 07/19/2024.

²⁹ Morgan-Wynne. 10.

³⁰ Ibid., 11.

³¹ Ibid., 1504.

³² Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*; 2014 Edition. Pg. 35.

³³ Buttrick, George Arthur Buttrick et al., eds., *The Interpreter's Bible - A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Abingdon Press, 1982). Colossians 190.

³⁴ Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern*. 99.

(Ezekiel 37:1-14). As Walter Brueggemann states, “the news of the book of Ezekiel is that YHWH wills life and has the power to grant it³⁵”. It is this “visionary anticipation of restoration”³⁶ upon which the rural church must rely. Rohr highlights this vision when he states we are awakened to our “self-image, our image of God, and our image of the world.”³⁷ However, as people of “ignorant perfection,”³⁸ it will require “a time of being unbuilt, stripped down to the core, and learning how to live from that clear humbled point”³⁹ of God’s grace. When spiritual awakening is experienced, the church will see through agape love, not human religious traditions, and see the grace of God which lives in each cultural context.

Jesus highlights agape love in new ways by reading the signs of culture in the story of the Samaritan woman, realigning the meaning of gender, uncleanness and sin. Our churches were in hopeless situations, bills unpaid, attendance down to less than ten, no mission activity, they had become self-enclosed shrines to the past. There was no light and no hope. So, we prayed for the Holy Spirit to come and re-innergize us, and it did. Today, all three churches have recovered and are thriving. This is nothing short of the work of God, through the anointing of the Holy Spirit. God through the Prophet Ezekiel gave us the model of re-innergizing - breath the Spirit of God on those dry dead bones and they will live again. Do it! Breath the breath of God on the church and watch it rise in mission once again.

In my experience, through this process, I have seen how the Holy Spirit implant God’s love in the church. It is God’s love implanted which re-innergizes the church to move into mission and ministry in unexplained ways. Then, in turn, when the church goes to where Holy Spirit is sending it the church itself begins to grow in spiritual depth - in numbers of people attending the church, in financial resources to maintain the church and its mission, in sustainability, and most significantly, in the mind of Christ.

Yet, even with a heightened awareness of the Holy Spirit, obstacles for the church remain. Therefore, there will need to be further research to assess the imposition of institutional structures (the machine of religion), rejecting culture, political agendas, and hierarchy in rural church leadership. Hirsch, quoting Neil Cole, states, “Structures are needed, but they must be simple, reproducible, and internal rather than external⁴⁰”. Hirsch continues by highlighting a fatalistic structure which is the existence of corporate leadership styles instead of Holy Spirit driven leadership within the church. He also argues that this structure will not be held because the goal is to preserve the institution instead of releasing the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, Richard Rohr offers a base from which all competing traditions or values may be measured: “Religion, bathed in Jesus’ love should function to radically re-connect”⁴¹ all of creation. God’s love is the body of Christ’s supporting ligament, fueled by the Holy Spirit and the Way of Jesus, which brings new possibilities of connection “even in the most hopeless situations when nothing else can”⁴². These contexts then, like Sparr, First Hawthorne and Pine, transform from the hopeless to the divinely hopeful, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

³⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). 197.

³⁶ Ibid., 197.

³⁷ Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern*. 99

³⁸ O.F.M. 99.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Hirsch, et al. 186

⁴¹ Rohr, et al, 7.

⁴² Ibid., 71.

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