

## CHAPTER 2

### CEDAR RAPIDS AND FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH CONTEXT

Jesus said, “And when the Holy Spirit comes on you, you will be able to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.” (Acts 1:8 The Message). The harvest field is anywhere Christians walk. Just as crops change across the United States, depending on the soils and climactic conditions, so do the techniques and approaches for planting, nourishing, and harvesting those crops. The individual farmer generally has a long history and is well rooted in the local culture, and it is the farmer’s fundamental understanding of what is needed to realize a rich harvest. Any plan to reform or revolutionize the church must take into account the local demographics and culture in order to craft a successful farming strategy. Understanding the city context of Cedar Rapids, Iowa and First Lutheran’s location and role greatly impacts the plan to make, mature, and mobilize apostolic disciples into mission.

#### **The External Harvest of Cedar Rapids**

Cedar Rapids, Iowa is located in the eastern half of Iowa and is second in population to the capital of Des Moines. With a population of 248,360, it has a blend of urban, suburban, and rural characteristics not generally found in larger metropolitan

areas.<sup>1</sup>, Table 2 records the population figures for 2000 for the Cedar Rapids Metropolitan Area (CRMA), as well as the changes realized since the 1990 census.

Table 2: Population Figures for Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Metric	Census 2000	% Change from 1990
Overall population	120,758	+11.0%
CR MSA (Linn, Benton, Jones)	237,780	+12.6%
Caucasian	225,430 (94.8%)	-1.8%
African American	5,740 (2.4%)	+0.7%
Hispanic	3,110 (1.3%)	+0.5%
Asian/Pacific	2,970 (1.2%)	+0.5%
Native American	530 (0.2%)	A trace increase

Cedar Rapids can be described as a city of three zones: urban, suburban, and rural. The downtown area of Cedar Rapids, where First Lutheran Church (FLC) is located, is approximately one mile in diameter, with FLC at the center. The suburban region is seven miles in diameter, with the balance of Linn County as a rural region. When an observer looks west from the author of this paper's front door on the southwest side of the city, one can see a shopping mall, a few banks, a business college, a Panera Bread shop, Carlos O'Kelly's cafe, Applebee's restaurant, a movie theatre, and the Aspen Athletic Club. To the east can be seen a typical sub-development, but the end of the block goes straight into a corn field. Virtually any point in Cedar Rapids can be reached in fifteen to twenty minutes of driving and rush hour seldom lasts longer than thirty minutes.

<sup>1</sup>Priority One, *Demographic Information for the Greater Cedar Rapids Area 2004/2005*. (Cedar Rapids, IA: Economic Development Division of the Cedar Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, n.d.), 8. The Cedar Rapids MSA is made up of Linn County, Benton County and Jones County..

### The Faithscape of Cedar Rapids

Cedar Rapids has a strong history in German, Scandinavian, and Czech cultures, indicative of Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestant dominance of Presbyterian (1847), Methodist (1843) and Lutheran (1868) churches in the local faith landscape.<sup>2</sup> Other pre-dominant denominations established in the early days of Cedar Rapids include: Baptists, Episcopalians, African Methodist Episcopalians, United Church of Christ, and the United Brethren Church.<sup>3</sup>

Documented in 1950, Murray wrote, “of some thirty religious denominations in the city, seventeen are old established, well known bodies, thirteen are of newer sects.”<sup>4</sup> In 1950, there were identified ten Presbyterian congregations, two Episcopal parishes, six Roman Catholic parishes, six Lutheran churches of five different synods, two congregational societies, Baptists with five societies, two Reformed churches, two Mormon bodies, two Jewish synagogues, and a Church of Christ Scientist.<sup>5</sup> Twelve less known bodies likely established briefly prior to 1950 include: two churches of Christ, a Church of God in Christ, Church of the Open Bible, Christ Sanctified Holy church, Covenant Church, Full Gospel Assembly, Jesus Name Church, Interdenominational Church, Church of the Nazarene, Foursquare Gospel Church, Unity Center and a Moslem

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<sup>2</sup> *The History of Linn County, Iowa* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1878), 501-503.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 501-511.

<sup>4</sup> Jannette Stevenson Murray and Frederick Gray Murray, *The Story of Cedar Rapids* (New York: Stratford House, 1950), 115.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-121.

Mosque—some seventy churches in all.<sup>6</sup> During the last few decades several evangelical Protestant churches were established in the area and exhibited significant growth.

Table 3 reports the relative sizes of the faith groups in Cedar Rapids and how the major mainline churches have fared with the leading Evangelicals since 1990. The following twelve groups are a selection of mainline Protestants and primary evangelical Protestants among some forty-eight prominent denominations represented.

Table 3. Churches and Church Membership in Cedar Rapids<sup>7</sup>

Faith Metric	Number of Parishes	Census 2000	% Change from 1990
Churched	159	110,000	
Un-Churched		80,000	
Catholic	19	45,000	14.5
Methodist	27	14,000	8.5
Lutheran ELCA	13	10,000	8.2
Lutheran Missouri Synod	9	6,148	-3.0
Presbyterian	15	5,491	-14.7
Disciples of Christ	7	3,181	5.7
Assembly of God	2	2,899	95.9
United Church of Christ	4	1,729	-5.8
American Baptist	4	1,464	29.2
Episcopal	3	1,300	37.6
North American Baptist	1	79	21.5
Independent Non-Charismatic	4	1,600	-8.0
Total	108 of 159	92,891	4.6

A review of table 2 leads to the following observations. Cedar Rapids has a dominant and growing Catholic presence of over 45,000 over nineteen parishes and

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>7</sup> *Churches and Church Membership in the United States 1990 and Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000* (Nashville, TN: Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, 2002), 1.

14.5% growth between 1990 and 2000. Eight mainline denominations (74 congregations) are represented with a total population of around 38,000 affiliates. The mainline presence as a whole appears to indicate fair stability and demonstrates growth, stability, or decline, based on the group. In Cedar Rapids, from 1990 to 2000, mainline churches experienced a 4.6% increase in members compared to a population growth for the county of 13.6% between 1990 and 2000 (168,767 to 191,701). Malphur's premise that 80 to 85% of traditional mainline churches are either plateaued or declining is supported by these figures.<sup>8</sup>

### **Learning from Evangelicals in Cedar Rapids**

Much of the recent numerical growth in the predominantly Anglo denominations in American Protestantism has occurred in congregations organized since 1960. The vast majority of these have been planted by evangelicals. Another equally valid diagnostic statement is a disproportionately large number of white Protestant church-goers can be found in congregations that (a) were organized after 1960 and (b) now average more than 800 at worship. Again, most of these can be classified as "evangelical," including hundreds affiliated with a mainline Protestant denomination. Another valid diagnostic statement is a disproportionately large number of white Protestant church-goers in America who were born after 1960 can be found in (a) nondenominational megachurches or (b) very large congregations affiliated with a denomination organized after 1906 such as the Assemblies of God.<sup>9</sup>

Although slightly smaller in number of adherents and number of congregations in Cedar Rapids, evangelical Protestants report significant growth trends. Mainline churches can learn from the fruitfulness, wisdom, and strategies of evangelical, non-mainline

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<sup>8</sup> Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround: Strategies for Congregations and Denominations*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 2005, 21.

brothers and sisters in Christ. Two of the largest and most rapidly growing churches in Cedar Rapids are the First Assembly of God and the New Covenant Bible Church (Independent non-charismatic).

First Assembly of God attributes its growth to God and God's response to a small group's faithfulness that meets five mornings a week at 6:00 A.M. to pray for the church's growth and its impact on the city.<sup>10</sup> Pastor Don McGarvey of First Assembly states:

I think we have continually offered many opportunities for folks to both find Christ as Savior and then to grow in their relationship with Him. We have provided many outreach type of events, such as concerts and dramas that have been designed for our folks to bring "seekers" with them to church. We have also been more deliberate in our approach to discipleship. We place a great deal of emphasis on Adult Sunday school classes where the teaching is all biblically-based and designed to help folks connect with one another at the same time. A few years back, we took an entire year for our Adult Sunday school classes to go through a four step discipleship teaching series called, "Discipleship 101, 201, 301 and 401." All of our Adult Sunday school classes and Wednesday night groups spent the year in these studies. And we continue to offer these courses, in an abbreviated form today.

There are other factors involved in the growth. We have a great music and worship ministry. We have a very active Children's Ministry. And we have spent a great deal of time, money and staffing on our Nursery ministry. I also think the relevancy of the senior pastor's sermons in the Sunday morning services has contributed greatly to the growth of the church. Folks know they can come and hear a biblically-based sermon that will be relevant to their lives and will provide them with practical ways to change and be drawn closer to God Monday through Saturday. Our Missions ministry has also contributed to the growth of the church by providing areas that are outside our church and even outside our own country. I think it is appealing to people today to be part of ministries that go beyond themselves. We have sent teams out for various projects and

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<sup>10</sup> Don McGarvey, e-mail message to author, August 2, 2005.

continue to have a steady stream of missionaries as guests in our church to help our congregation keep a biblical “worldview” of life.<sup>11</sup>

First Assembly meets the needs of multiple generations, teaches congregants, equips them for discipleship, and sends them out to reach people who do not know the Lord.

Executive Pastor Kim Pagel of New Covenant Bible Church attributes its growth to five primary principles. First, New Covenant is faithful to a biblical vision and mission of making disciples. Pagel writes:

Our mission is rooted in the Scriptures and the foundation of all we do. We have done a better job the past five years of articulating and communicating this mission to our church family. Our mission is to glorify God as a family of growing disciples who are becoming wholehearted worshippers, faithful witnesses, caring community members, Christ-like models and equipped servants.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Pagel believes the value of servant leadership, instilled by their deceased former Senior Pastor, creates a church culture where men, women, teens, and children love to serve.<sup>13</sup> “Our leaders and staff seek to cast the vision and then equip and mobilize our entire church family for implementation. Servanthood is one of our values and is a way of life at New Covenant,”<sup>14</sup> writes Pagel. Third, Pagel notes that, “God has blessed us with a unified leadership team of elders, deacons, and staff. We love one another and seek to model our mission, vision and values to our church family. . . . This allows us to move

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Pagel, e-mail to author, July 29, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

forward in to the future with creativity and flexibility.”<sup>15</sup> A fourth component Pagel cites is the church’s talented musicians, leaders, and staff. Finally, Pagel makes this important point: “Many families tell us that they started coming to New Covenant because of our children’s and youth ministries.”<sup>16</sup> New Covenant demonstrates passionate spirituality among all generations with a clear mission of apostolic discipleship built on servanthood.

Evangelical churches have raised the bar of discipleship and membership compared to mainline churches. Mainline churches keep members on the rolls based on a contribution of any amount and/or attendance at one worship service a year. Some churches purge their rolls regularly, but other churches keep people on for life, unless a transfer is formally requested. Among evangelical Protestant churches, on-going membership is based on average worship figures, Sunday school attendance, and/or a set of clear expectations. Evangelical Free churches base their numbers on sixteen year old and older attendees, and members who worship regularly. Locally, Cedar Hills Evangelical Free reports over 600 worshippers per weekend with a formal membership of about 330. If Evangelical Free guidelines were used in mainline churches the results would be less robust than their present statistics suggest.

FLC can learn from these fruitful, evangelical congregations effective biblically-based strategies to make, mature, and mobilize disciples sent out to service.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

### **Religious Pluralism and the Unchurched in Cedar Rapids**

The growth of religious pluralism in the United States is reflected in recent trends among religious groups in Cedar Rapids.<sup>17</sup> The Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) was present in Cedar Rapids prior to the 1990 census and grew from 930 adherents in 1990 to 1,242 in 2000, a 33.5% growth rate. Unitarian Universalists experienced a decline of 27.1% to 1,192 members. Those who reported to the 2000 Metro Area Report include Muslims (2300), Jewish (420), Baha'i' (107), and Hindus and Buddhists who report one religious community each, although no statistics on affiliation are provided.

Cedar Rapids includes an expansive mission field. The statistics reveal that over 109,343 (57%) people have religious affiliations, and almost 43% do not affiliate with any religious group.<sup>18</sup> Since a large number of people are disconnected from the churches, and demonstrate a nominal Christian lifestyle (rare worship attendance and minimal signs of any church connection) it can be argued that perhaps 50 to 60 percent of the Cedar Rapids area population is ready for harvest. The post-modern, post-Christendom era presents great opportunities for churches to use creative, intentional tactics and reach this expanding mission field, or become irrelevant and die.

### **Signs of Mainline Decline, Plateau, and Renewal in Cedar Rapids**

There is a trend in Cedar Rapids among mainline congregations of a continual maintenance mode of existence. The author of this paper interviewed several churches

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<sup>17</sup> *Churches and Church Membership in the United States*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*.

who indicated they practice a clergy-centrism paradigm that perpetuates a passive, unmobilized membership ill-equipped to articulate or exhibit their faith, and grow churches. As a result some disenfranchised Catholics and mainline Protestants worship elsewhere, often at the most vibrant worship center. Hence, Assembly of God congregations, independents, and dynamic evangelical Protestant churches draw worshippers who seek passionate spirituality. These congregations were founded after 1960 and address the needs of multiple generations effectively. They understand current culture trends, demonstrate creative and thematic worship, and articulate a clear vision and plan. Mainline congregations could learn from their relevant approaches and creative insights.

Schaller cites six choices aging congregations must make to survive and grow:

(1) initiate and implement the changes required to reach and serve new generations, (2) watch their numbers grow smaller and focus their resources on institutional survival, (3) dissolve, (4) merge with another congregation in hopes of avoiding change, (5) focus on transmitting the Christian faith to their children, or (6) relocate the meeting place as part of a larger strategy to begin to outline a new role in their history.<sup>19</sup>

Mainline churches in Cedar Rapids have made several choices and efforts to promote growth. The rising competition for sustainable membership, the costs associated with buildings, budgets, and clergy and staff have affected these urban center churches significantly. Schaller affirms this condition among other American churches:

How can we explain the decline of the mainline denominations that dominated American Protestantism in the 1950s? One explanation is the change in the context and the arrival of younger generations has made those old systems obsolete. The winners of the 1800-1950 eras have become the losers of the post-1950 competition. A disproportionately large number of the winners since 1950 era have come from among the

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<sup>19</sup> Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 11.

new denominations and movements and the nondenominational independent churches. A more useful diagnosis suggests the mainline Protestant denominations are no longer competitive.<sup>20</sup>

The circumstances in Cedar Rapids provide evidence in support of Schaller's diagnosis. For example, First Presbyterian recently completed a \$6 million building renovation project, covered primarily by abundant endowment funds. First Presbyterian was known as a large, thriving church recognized for its youth ministry in the 1950s, social ministry in the 1960s, recent staff growth in the early 1990s and decline in the late 1990s. Recently, First Presbyterian ignited a renewed spirit through the renovation project and a time of ministry evaluation. Significant questions arise from this substantial investment: "Will renovation of the building build momentum for spiritual and renewed numerical growth? Could the capital investment been used to design a customized turnaround strategy that spreads the gospel in more creative, personal, and faith-related ways relevant to the new millennium?"

St. Paul's United Methodist, located four blocks from FLC, occupied its present site in the early 1900s. St. Paul's grew as Cedar Rapids grew, particularly in the 1950s and 60s. Heffner writes:

What started as 12 charter members in 1843 grew to 2,052 members in 1926. Soon the worshipers outnumbered even the rather new 800 seat sanctuary and two Sunday morning services were established with a continually growing Sunday school. The church members were active throughout the city, state and the world in matters of mission, faith and social concerns. They grieved with each other during times of war and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 38.

celebrated in times of peace. They worked for civil rights in the 1960's and grew to over 3,000 members.<sup>21</sup>

The church entered a period of decline until it experienced a turning point in March 2004 when St. Paul's released six staff due to a budget shortfall exceeding \$100,000. Coupled with this financial downturn, worship and Sunday school attendance had dropped over a period of four years and came to head between 2002 and 2004. As the stress of this downturn led to symptoms of infectious anxiety manifesting itself through reactivity, pointing fingers of blame, and decline in staff and congregation morale, the judicatory determined a need for in depth consultation using a systems approach.<sup>22</sup>

Since that acute time, a new senior pastor has provided effective leadership and signs of healthy renewal are emerging. Pastor Gillespie identifies the church's ill health as long-term since the 1960s common to established (pre-1950) mainline Protestant congregations. Gillespie refers to Steinke's work, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, naming St. Paul's being stuck in a clergy-focused system in which clergy are overly depended upon, no activity can happen without the clergy present, and that clergy are primarily responsible for what happens.<sup>23</sup> Through intensive study with congregational leaders and staff using Steinke's book, Gillespie sees increased health towards becoming a mission-focused congregation. Signs of health include clearer focus with a specific vision, movement from clergy-centrism to a participatory system of a

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<sup>21</sup> Beth Heffner, *St. Paul's United Methodist Church, 1840-1990* (Cedar Rapids, IA: St. Paul's United Methodist Church, 1989), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Harlan Gillespie, telephone conversation with author, September 9, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2005), 44.

prayerful and discerning gathering of the priesthood of all believers ultimately being mobilized for mission.

Gillespie stated two primary foci for increased health, to increase participation and communication for their turnaround strategy. Gillespie summarizes the following strategies to increase participation in all areas of St. Paul's church life:

Clarification and definition of roles and relationships among remaining staff members and lay leadership to each other and the church. The goal is to change the church culture from personal preference to mission and ministry-minded. Begin a 10-year process of teaching, modeling and encouraging the stewardship of Prayers, Presence, Gifts and Service as the basis of the Christian Life. This includes teaching that it is each person's personal responsibility to attend to growth and maturity in each of these four areas and that the church's mission is to provide instruction, encouragement and support.<sup>24</sup>

To increase the level of communication, Gillespie articulates these strategies:

St. Paul's has developed a covenant of ministry with the entire congregation of expectations and ways of communicating in a healthy manner. A member and newcomer handbook entitled, "The Life of St. Paul's" is the working document of this covenant. It will be revised and released annually to all members and used as the primary resource for the new member orientation. Systems of ministry for the following areas have been and are being re-developed in cooperative ministry areas and teams of clergy and lay persons. One example is a Ministry of Finance plan using the Consecration Sunday model using monthly communication pieces of a monthly ministry of finance newsletter and monthly household financial statements. To grow health and communication among staff and lay leaders, the following specific strategies are being implemented: regular and frequent staff and lay leadership meetings, retreats, opportunities for personal and communal leadership development, establishing a staff covenant (2004) and frequent review of staff covenant, an expectation of personal and professional growth and excellence in relationship building.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Harlan Gillespie, e-mail to author, August 18, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

To rebuild “infrastructure” systems St. Paul’s will create plans and policies regarding building use, maintenance, and outreach into the neighborhood, staff, committee and ministry relationships, roles and responsibilities, better systems of basic ministries like funerals, weddings, baptisms, communion, and all aspects of the varied styles of worship.<sup>26</sup> For pastoral care of the congregation communication will increase as new attitudes and cultures of caring grow through prayer vigils, newsletters, e-communications, and increased equipping of already large and well equipped lay caring ministries.<sup>27</sup> Clearly defining the roles, relationships and partnerships of clergy and lay caring ministries will strengthen overall communication and unity.<sup>28</sup>

Gillespie concludes St. Paul’s strategies with these poignant words:

It will take a long time of good work, responsively done, resisting the temptation of emotional reactions by clergy and lay leadership. There will be some rather significant losses yet to come - some beloved, but highly disgruntled members will most likely leave the church, as well as necessary staff changes for those staff members who either cannot or will not seek personal and communal maturity. Often times the changing and decaying neighborhood is sighted as the major concern of the congregation, but I do not think that this is so. It is more of the inability to move through the natural and inevitable internal changes of the congregation in a healthy fashion that is the greater challenge.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Recent fruits of their labor through their turnaround strategy include fulfilling their goals financially to their judicatory and a new spirit and health articulated as a “different feeling, a sense of quiet confidence in the air”.<sup>30</sup>

Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, near FLC, remained stable during the last few decades. Although continuing traditional ministry, new lay ministry paid positions are being developed and utilized in large Catholic Parish contexts. The church is located near affordable inner-city housing where newer immigrants dwell. The population includes Hispanics with ties to the Catholic church background, and a new worship ministry has grown into a significant program for the Hispanic community.

Westminster Presbyterian (PC USA) was founded in May 1855 and moved to its present location around 1900. Westminster included 700 to 900 worshippers in its strongest period between the 1900s and 1950s. In 1955 496 people attended Sunday school and membership was over 2000 in 1976, but a major decline developed in the late 1950s through the 1980s. After a series of ups and downs in the 1990s, Westminster called a visionary senior pastor who employed the Purpose- Driven Church model<sup>31</sup>. A series of ventures was undertaken to turn the congregation around: a Family Life Center with a multi-purpose/non-traditional worship space was completed in 2002, and it was used for a contemporary family style worship service that grew from 45 to 125 in one year. The Westminster membership rolls number 900 and 400 worship in three weekend

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<sup>30</sup> Harlan Gillespie, telephone conversation with author, September 9, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998).

services. A creative appeal that draws new members is a daily one minute radio devotional sponsored by Westminster Church on a local FM radio station.

The thesis of this paper is that biblically and theologically sound strategies can be developed that make, mature, and mobilize Christians for apostolic discipleship. These examples demonstrate that a plateaued church or a church in decline can make apostolic disciples when new vision and initiative, coupled with bold leadership, revitalizes a congregation and reverses the decline. Schaller suggests that the way to reverse years of numerical decline is to introduce a counterforce described as a turnaround strategy that is customized to the polity, culture, and resources of a specific denomination.<sup>32</sup>

Conversely, several downtown churches have died, are dying, have merged with other congregations, or have moved from downtown to the edge of town. Across the street from FLC, First Christian (Disciples of Christ) has gone through three pastors in ten years, and their most recent pastor left after a four year tenure. The pastor cites several symptoms of this dying congregation. First Christian declined over a long period because the church split over a decision to remain downtown or move to the suburbs. The average age of current members is in the seventies, with several in their eighties and nineties. They continue doing the same things with the same attitude and recall the glory days. The former pastor states “Nothing creative is done to attract young people.”<sup>33</sup> The denominational body will likely close First Christian’s doors.

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<sup>32</sup> Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Telephone conversation between the former pastor and the author, July 28, 2005.

First Baptist is located one block North of FLC in a building constructed in 1917 when no parking was necessary because the trolley stopped at the front door. As public transportation changed and one-way streets were instituted, the church gradually declined, along with two other mainline, downtown churches in similar situations. In response to the changed environment and nearing extinction, First Baptist sold its building and purchased five acres five miles north of the inner city location. First Baptist sold the building in 1985, merged with The Brethren Church (German Baptist), and built a new church. With a prime location, critical mass, parking space, good facilities, and an unusually strong professional staff of three seminary trained pastors, worship grew from 85 to 300.<sup>34</sup> A consultant recently suggested the church change the name of First Baptist Church-Church of the Brethren, and give more authority to the professional staff for decision-making in order to grow from a smaller program-sized church of 150-350 to a growing corporate size congregation of 350-500 or more.<sup>35</sup>

Another former downtown congregation is a Vineyard Church called The Father's House. Pastor Marty Boller cited the need for affordable space he believed was available downtown;<sup>36</sup> however, the church outgrew the space and experienced limited parking. These factors precipitated a move to the edge of the city where parking was plentiful and land was available for expansion. The church doubled its space, but outgrew it again and

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<sup>34</sup> Jerry Springston, telephone conversation with the author, July 28, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Alice Mann, *The In-Between Church: Navigating Size Transitions in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1998), 3.

<sup>36</sup> Marty Boller, telephone conversation with author, July 28, 2005.

is considering a long-term vision of planting three more congregations using one staff to minister at multiple sites.

It is clear that effective change can be implemented in plateaued or declining congregations through practical and biblically sound strategies that mature, equip, and mobilize members into apostolic mission.

### **FLC's Decision to Remain Downtown and ELCA Locations**

In 1992-1993, FLC conducted a facility study and a study of its ministry needs to accommodate and expand its ministries and outreach. Evidence for expansion on the current site or a potential relocation was studied. A 1993 ELCA study posed three key questions: (1) Would relocation leave a void in the present location? (2) If relocating, would it have a negative impact on the ministry of another ELCA congregation in the relocation area? (3) Would relocation require financial resources that would limit the congregation's ability for effective ongoing ministry in the future? Despite the potential plateau and decline trend of downtown bound churches, FLC leadership chose to remain downtown for three reasons. First, FLC owns an expensive building. If sold, the congregation would receive only a portion of its value. With an estimated land value of \$1 million, no ELCA congregation could afford it. The cost for twenty acres of land and the construction of a pre-fabricated building was projected to be \$12 million. Secondly, FLC's central location is accessible from all areas of the city and beyond, thereby making it a potential regional church. Thirdly, there are ample opportunities for inner-city

ministry to a variety of groups who are immediately accessible; therefore, the opportunities for need-oriented evangelism are immediately at hand.

ELCA congregations are likely to grow, according to Inskip, if they number more than 1,500 baptized members.<sup>37</sup> He adds, “Just as with size, there are congregations that grow no matter what their setting, but overall, ELCA congregations in the medium and large cities have been particularly hard hit with membership losses. Only the congregations in the distant suburbs of large cities are showing significant growth.”<sup>38</sup> This describes the growth of St. Mark’s Lutheran, once located near the urban center, but now in a growing Cedar Rapids suburb. St. Mark’s Lutheran prepared its congregation for substantial growth when it bought thirty acres of land, a competent staff of specialized lay leadership rather than pastors, and initiated worship services and new ministries aimed at all generations. Schaller affirms this approach and might suggest the local synod expand this congregation as a primary regional church for the ELCA.<sup>39</sup>

It would seem that First Lutheran with almost 3,000 members is positioned for numerical growth in a primarily Caucasian culture in a metropolitan area in the Midwest. After expanding facilities and parking lot space, however, FLC has concerns. Factors detrimental to growth include First Lutheran’s landlocked downtown location with limited parking space, limited worship space during primetime worship hours, and full classrooms and multi-purpose rooms used during primetime. First Lutheran is not

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<sup>37</sup> Inskip, *The Context for Mission and Ministry in the ELCA*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround*, 119.

positioned for growth due to space issues, and alternative approaches require careful consideration to position FLC for growth. First Lutheran will remain plateaued in its current paradigm, and multi-site or church plant construction options need further consideration. Therefore, biblically and theologically sound strategies are necessary to make, mature, and mobilize disciples into apostolic mission.

### **Mission Field Prospects**

Implications can be drawn regarding the Cedar Rapids context and FLC's opportunities for numerical and spiritual growth, and mission outreach. First, as a large city in Iowa, Cedar Rapids attracts businesses, jobs, and families. Overall population growth trends show a steady increase, although primarily in the expanding suburbs. Second, FLC's concentrated outreach efforts can be directed to several specific groups. Target groups include the disenfranchised, poor, and recently incarcerated; mobile, disconnected young adults aged twenty to forty; and those who are isolated or disconnected, and living in care centers.

For example, those in the twenty to forty age group include many who are single and couples without children who are less likely to be connected with a church. Marriage preparation is a key entry point and opportunity to connect them with the church through small groups, worship, and fellowship events. When couples have children, the focus is on sustaining the connection following their children's baptisms. For future church growth, FLC can focus on creative approaches to reach multiple, younger, generational groups through church interior ministries and intentional outreach efforts. As the

population ages and the median age rises, FLC can expand its services and ministries to older generations. To reach all generations, an intentional, organized and integrated intergenerational ministry approach needs careful consideration and development.

Percept's resources provided demographic information and membership trends, but did not yield insight into the activity level of the general membership. Percept's Faith Facts estimates that among the three major zip codes in Cedar Rapids, 29 to 30 percent have no faith involvement, 33 to 34 percent have moderate faith involvement, and 36 to 37 percent have strong faith involvement<sup>40</sup>. The attendance figures for FLC on an average weekend reflect this same pattern: one third attend regularly, one third occasionally, and the remaining third may appear at Christmas and/or Easter. It is intriguing that Cedar Rapids citizens, particularly in the city center or urban area, indicate an 84 to 87 percent preference for an "Historic Christian" tradition.<sup>41</sup> Mainline churches appear to have an advantage in prospect appeal, especially based on "Church Style Preference of Traditional versus Contemporary."<sup>42</sup> "Based upon likely worship, music and architectural style preferences in the area, the overall church style preference can be described as *somewhat traditional* to *somewhat contemporary*."<sup>43</sup> A key fact is that the overall faith receptivity level is considered "somewhat high" versus the country's norm

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<sup>40</sup> Percept, *My Community: 10 Faith Facts*, <http://link2lead.com> (proprietary database), 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Percept, *Ministry Area Profile*, <http://link2lead.com> (proprietary database), 6.

of “average.” Based on these important data, FLC’s worship context and variety of services should meet much of the worship interest revealed in the Percept data.

### **Intergenerational Outreach**

It is important to understand each generation’s ideas and interests so the church can meet the essential needs of each generation. The following insights are extrapolated from The Center for Generational Studies<sup>44</sup> and an informal FLC context survey.

#### **Matures (Born prior to 1946)**

This generation of people sixty years and older represents 573 or 21 percent of the FLC congregation. Many of these congregants grew up experiencing a pastor who focused on the needs of the congregation. Many of these people have been at FLC for multiple decades and have invested their time and resources in the ministry of FLC. Typically they are resistant to change and will tend to avoid it.<sup>45</sup>

In this stage of life, hospital calls, home visits, and funerals are important to their life stage, and their children’s weddings and baptisms remain important. They typically want a pastor at these events, not a substitute. Some want to contribute through service ministry, for this is a part of their dedication and duty. They are faithful in worship, if they are mobile and can travel to the building. Due to illness, physical limitations, loss of a loved one, or disconnectedness, a growing number gradually loses touch with FLC.

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<sup>44</sup> The Center for Generational Studies, *Managing Age Diversity in Today’s Workplace* (Aurora, CO: The Center for Generational Studies, 2004), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Some are quite isolated, disconnected, and lonely, having lost touch with what was once a prominent part of their lives. Home-based visitation is important for many. The FLC care center worship services and deacon ministry with communion reach this generation. Expansion of a wholistic health ministry with a Parish Nurse Team and a visitation pastor could be a positive program and strengthen FLC's ministry to this older generation.

#### Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)

The boomers, ages forty-one to fifty-nine, include 617 members or 23 percent of the FLC congregation. This segment for the most part, ranges from the early stage of raising children to the experience of the empty nest. Perceived issues in the FLC context include: parenting (raising children during the infant years to teens and young adulthood), divorce, spiritual direction and purpose, marriage enrichment, and finances. The boomers seek quality, efficiency, teamwork, and service.<sup>46</sup> Whereas the Matures are content with one or two options, Boomers seek a variety of options done with excellence. Burger King's slogan, "Have it your way," is welcomed by Boomers. Patterns among mainline churches indicate that once the children of Boomers complete Confirmation, an exodus of both generations takes place. As Empty Nesters, issues regarding young adult children, and the couple's own marriage rise to the surface. Counseling and small groups addressing these issues are relevant. This generation is less loyal, will explore other worship opportunities, or go elsewhere if their perceived needs are not met.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2.

### Generation X (Born 1965-1980)

This generation includes ages of twenty-five to forty years and numbers 529 people or 19 percent of FLC. Xers “work to live” contrary to the Boomers, who “live to work”.<sup>47</sup> They desire a sense of contribution while enjoying themselves.<sup>48</sup> Due to changes in cultural institutions (marriage is forever, but divorce is rampant), “Xers have become a generation skeptical of traditional practices and beliefs.”<sup>49</sup> Potential Gen X questions may include: “With whom can we experience life deeply?” If they are married, “How do we strengthen our marriage?” If they have children, “How may we become better parents and teach the faith in our home?” If they are single, “How can I connect with people and grow a circle of friends?”

### Millennials (Born 1981-2000)

This generation represents those six to twenty-four years of age. There are 663 FLC millennial members or 24 percent of the congregation. “They are the most demographically diverse generation in U.S. history. One in three is what the U.S. government defines as a minority. One in four has grown up in a single parent home.”<sup>50</sup> Conditioned to live in the moment, they seek the immediacy of technology and expect everything from it.<sup>51</sup> They have learned to question everything, and in an age of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

situational ethics, truth is believed to be relative. The older millennial segment seeks its place in an increasingly undependable world. Many have left their churches in their teens if they were connected to a church. Partnering with parachurch organizations in the schools and with local church networks increases opportunities for connections among these teens and young adults. Family ministry events designed to bond immediate families while connecting with others, is vital to creating and sustaining fruitful, faith-based relationships.

#### Generation Z (Born after 2001)

The next generation, those born the year 2001 and following include infants to five years of age and 303 such children represent 11 percent of the congregation population. The young parents of these little ones are often uprooted from their birthplaces and need sustaining friendships with other couples of their generation and older generations. Sustaining a healthy marriage in these difficult and even volatile years requires mentoring through diverse small groups or intentional marriage mentor experiences. FLC can be more proactive and target this population by assessing and addressing its needs.

#### Additional Generational Issues

In order to meet the interests of churched people and those not connected to the church, it is important to explore what people want and seek. Percept provides specific data from the downtown Cedar Rapids zip code (52403) that indicate sports and/or camping programs, active retirement programs, cultural programs (music and art) and

adult theological discussion groups may exceed the national average as interests among the downtown Cedar Rapids population. As an overall category, programs related to recreation are the most significant based upon total number of households and comparison to national averages.<sup>52</sup> Since FLC is a regional church, however, it draws from multiple zip codes (52404 and 52302). These data indicate there is above average interest among these groups in marriage enrichment opportunities, parent training programs, church-sponsored day school, family activities and outings, twelve-step recovery programs, and food and clothing resources.<sup>53</sup> These programs meet the needs of multiple generations and are key factors to explore more deeply and act upon for the church to sustain itself over time and become a church for all generations.

Generational demographics demonstrate that the Cedar Rapids mission field includes the Millennials (28 percent of the population) and Generation X members (27 to 30 percent), which reflect general U.S. population statistics.<sup>54</sup> The Boomers include 23 to 24 percent, and five year population trend projects that Gen Z (born after 2001) will be near the national norm of 11 percent.<sup>55</sup> Mainline churches enjoy faithful worship attendance by older generations who grew up in an era of incremental change. But the post-World War II generations are waning in church involvement and are comprised of almost twice as many unchurched people. At the present time, the church has experienced

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<sup>52</sup> Percept, *Ministry Area Profile*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Percept, *My Community: 10 Generational Facts*, <http://www.link2lead.com> (proprietary database), 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the lowest ebb in church attendance in over a decade. Barna attributes this decline to an increasing abandonment of traditional churches by disillusioned post-1945 generations.<sup>56</sup>

Bob Whitesel and Kent Hunger report:

When this scenario is combined with the prediction that older generations who pay most of the church's bills will be gone in two decades, it becomes clear that the church is facing a crisis of aging. The primary cause of this decline is the church's failure to assimilate younger generations to the same high degree it has successfully incorporated older generations.<sup>57</sup>

To grow and flourish, the Cedar Rapids Christian community must strengthen its outreach to younger generations through relevant ministries that address their interests and demonstrate integrity through passionate spirituality. Biblically and theologically sound strategies are vital for churches to make, mature, and mobilize apostolic disciples of all generations.

### **Cedar Rapids' Response to Its Inhabitants' Priorities**

Since the younger generations are not coming to churches in strong numbers, congregants and staff must seek out the unchurched and other prospects. Opportunities for outreach include recreational interests that were rated particularly high among younger generations. The Cedar Rapids area offers resources including multiple sports leagues for all ages, a great variety of musical entertainment, and a plethora of coffeehouses. Churches are growing more intentional in using these venues to interact

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<sup>56</sup> George Barna, *The Barna Report 1994-1995: Virtual America* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 46-48.

<sup>57</sup> Bob Whitesel and Kent R. Hunger, *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gaps in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 14-17.

with people through desirable social places and activities. These interfaces and the crafting of relevant Christian responses appropriate to these venues can open the door for further spiritual connection. Mobilizing apostolic disciples means to be sent and “go to” the harvest.

A new opportunity for connection with multiple generations and groups developed in 2004-2005 through a community planning process facilitated by the Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation.<sup>58</sup> The dialogue opened the door for city organizations, businesses, and churches to discuss and review documentation regarding the major issues faced in the area. The results are *Fifteen in 5*, or fifteen priorities for the next five years. This information is foundational as the Christian community works cooperatively and makes the priorities realities. Beyond several economic or business initiatives, three ideas stand out as potential opportunities for churches’ involvement. The first of the three ideas is to make health care accessible to the underserved through a health care collaborative that provides services and disease prevention education to the underserved and underinsured of Linn County. The second idea is to make parks more attractive to youth and families by increasing the number of playgrounds, splash pads (water spray equipment for young children) and green space in key locations, and encouraging family events. FLC and other churches are now using these renewed parks for multiple events. The third idea is neighborhood empowerment. There is a need to establish a “communities in transition” program to assist grass-roots neighborhood groups in improving housing and other properties. Churches can be on the frontlines of

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<sup>58</sup> *Community* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Greater Cedar Rapids Community Foundation, 2005), 3-4.

service in these neighborhoods, whether downtown or in church members' immediate neighborhoods.

With these perceived priorities in mind, congregations of passionate believers who are eager to serve and tend to particular community needs can shape and transform the social culture. This is an important opportunity for the church to respond and join the front lines addressing these priorities. Renewal can take place in churches as they collectively respond to the interests of the broader community. Chapter 3 will describe these challenges and present key transitions. The transitions are necessary as FLC uses biblically and theologically sound strategies to make, mature, and mobilize Christians for apostolic mission.