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THE NEED FOR INTERCHURCH UNITY AMONG
NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND EVANGELICAL CHURCHES

A THESIS PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEGREE
IN CONGREGATION AND FAMILY CARE

BY
PHILIP ANDREW WOOD
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA
MAY 2017

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ABSTRACT

This project addresses the lack of and need for unity between evangelical churches in northern New England. It is not an area known for cooperation, being open to change, or orthodox Christianity. It is a region with typically small churches that should unify under the Gospel message, yet many of these churches have lacked the desire to cooperate in the past. This project provides a route to a more cooperative, Christ-like, and unified evangelical interchurch community.

Biblical and theological sources were used to gather data for this project. This data focused on passages pertaining to church unity and disunity from the Bible, as well as the history and practice of church cooperation. The ecclesiastical history of northern New England was also briefly examined. Further, this project contains information from interviews and field notes from three case studies at three sites in northern New England.

The interviews at the New Hampshire site took place in and around the Berlin/Gorham Androscoggin River region. The interviews at the Maine site focused on the "Ossipee/Sacopee Valley" Ossipee River area. The interviews at the Vermont site took place in the municipality of Rutland. Each site displayed diverse and interesting dynamics of interchurch unity. Cooperation, the limits thereof, history, interchurch evangelism, as well as theological opinions are all discussed at great lengths.

A plan is also given for implementing interchurch cooperation in northern New England communities and elsewhere. The desire of this project is to biblically and

rationally encourage those in the evangelical church to self-examine and find the necessity of interchurch cooperation. In doing so these churches should find reasonable areas of common interest and good they can participate in together. By applying and implementing the principles laid out in this project, the benefits of evangelical unity will be discovered to positively impact the Kingdom of God, the local church, and the community it serves.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandfather, Clinton Allen Baird, who helped shape my faith and whom I dearly miss.

CHAPTER ONE: THE NEED FOR INTERCHURCH UNITY

The Problem

There is considerable and long-lasting division, criticism, and alienation amongst and between local churches which all serve the same New England communities. Among some local interchurch communities there is cooperation but it is often inadequate from a biblical perspective. These divisions and alienation, as well as inadequate cooperation, abound among small evangelical churches in northern New England. This ongoing interchurch reality should be recognized and addressed. Principles need to be discovered and examined in order to rectify this interchurch problem.

The church is meant to be the body of Christ and is to come together because of the Gospel. The church should develop as an interchurch community in love and respect, as well as outreaching to the surrounding community they are called to serve. This project addressed the inadequacy of cooperation between small, northern New England, evangelical churches in the areas of outreach and interchurch community development. In response to the problem itself the researcher engaged biblical/theological concerns corresponding to church unity and cooperation. Then the researcher reviewed relevant literature corresponding to interdenominational cooperation and outreach. Next the researcher explored and defined reasons why some small evangelical churches do not cooperate with each other. After that the researcher explored effective models and examples, where this kind of cooperation works. Finally the researcher identified what principles can and should be applied to small evangelical churches in northern New

England to solve this inadequacy. Both by recognizing the problem of disunity and finding solutions to it, the evangelical church in northern New England can become the body Christ has called it to be.

Definition of Terms

Community Development: A process in which a church or churches are growing with each other, in the grace of God, through relationships, accountability, teaching, and acts of service.

Christian: Historically orthodox believers in Christ who hold to the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.

Evangelical: Historically orthodox Protestant Christians who more specifically and at a bare minimum hold to these most basic tenets of faith: the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, Jesus Christ being both God and perfect Man, the Trinity, Creation ex nihilo, the fallen nature of man, salvation alone through the atonement on the cross, the Resurrection of Christ, and His Second Coming.

Evangelism: The proclamation of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to unchurched and unchristian individuals.

Interdenominational: Cooperation between churches of different evangelical denominations.

Interchurch: Cooperation between different local evangelical churches.

Outreach: To reach beyond the church into the surrounding unchurched community, in the areas of evangelism and compassion or social justice ministries.

Small: A single site church, with regular attendance of less than 150.

Unchurched: Those people in the community who do not regularly attend a local Christian church congregation.

Delimitations of the Problem

The research was limited to churches that are considered to be evangelical Christian in doctrine and practice. Additionally, the research was limited to churches in the boundaries of northern New England. Likewise only churches that are small in size were researched. Therefore church cooperation and ecumenism in totality was not examined. As well this study primarily examined interchurch communities in the years from 1960-2016. Even so the prior history of northern New England was considered in how it effected present day circumstances within churches in northern New England.

Assumptions

The researcher's first assumption is that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and is critical in addressing all church problems. It is the final authority to measure all other authorities by, especially to the church. The researcher also assumes that church cooperation among many evangelical churches is biblically inadequate or limited. Cooperation in many communities is simply non-existent. These assumptions then create the problem for the researcher that interchurch cooperation is both a biblical mandated and yet biblically inadequate.

Setting of the Project

The setting of this project is the northern New England evangelical church. Northern New England is in many ways demographically on the extreme ends of religious and rural culture. It has been in the past a fiercely independent, ethnically homogenous, Caucasian group of people. More specifically, northern New England has

been white Anglo-Saxon Protestant with pockets of French Canadian Roman Catholics. Those facts are ever changing and do not represent northern New England in the way it did even a decade ago.

That cultural setting is most changed in the area of religion. Today it is not uncommon to refer to New England itself as a “mission field”; in northern New England that distinction is all the more true. The setting of northern New England has a religious distinction more closely comparable to Europe than much of the rest of the United States. It is not uncommon to see a number of old run-down church buildings being used as community centers, museums, and houses or in many cases simply abandoned. Over a period of years, there has been a slow and steady decline of a number of local churches. Just within the four-town region of the researcher, the disintegration of church communities has left the landscape with at least six separate abandoned church buildings. Five of these six church communities no longer meet nor exist. Two other local church communities who rented facilities also have ceased meeting. This leaves seven church communities still in existence in this four town area, meaning one half of all church communities have gone out of existence in recent years, showing a troubling situation at hand. This is just a small example that something is fundamentally broken with the church as a whole in northern New England.

The statistics support northern New England being in a religious decline; Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont have the distinction of an ever-growing number of “nones.” “Nones” are people with no religious affiliation or distinction according to the Pew Research Center. Vermont leads the country as having the most “nones” as a

percentage of its population, growing from 34 percent in 2008 to 37 percent in 2014.¹

New Hampshire ranks second with 29 percent in 2008 growing to 36 percent in 2014, and Maine ranks fifth with 25 percent in 2008, and 31 percent in 2014.²

It will not be surprising that in the United States (including Washington, D.C.,) Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine are considered the least churched states. According to Gallup they have the smallest percentage of people who say they regularly attend a weekly service.³ Vermont is the least-churched state with only 17 percent of its population regularly attending church services followed closely by New Hampshire holding the fiftieth place at 20 percent, and Maine as the forty-ninth least churched state, also at 20 percent.⁴

Narrowing these religious statistics further, the actual percentage of those who self-identify as evangelical Christians in these three states is also quite low. According to Pew, Vermont was the fourth least evangelical state with 11 percent claiming this identification; New Hampshire tied for the fifth least self-identified evangelical state at 13 percent. Finally, Maine tied as the seventh least evangelical state at 14 percent.⁵

Thus the religious setting which is the primary setting for this study in northern New England is itself anemic, resulting in smaller church communities. What also

¹ “America's Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, May 12, 2015, (accessed March 9, 2016)

² “America's Changing Religious Landscape.”

³ “Frequent Church Attendance Highest in Utah, Lowest in Vermont,” *Gallup.com. February 17, 2015*, (accessed March 9, 2016)

⁴ “Frequent Church Attendance Highest in Utah, Lowest in Vermont.”

⁵ <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/2014> (accessed March 9, 2016)

hinders and creates relatively smaller evangelical churches in this setting are rural and smaller towns. Maine is the least urbanized state in the union at 38.7 percent,⁶ which means only 38.7 percent of the population lives in an urban center. This means over 60 percent of the population lives in small towns which typically contain smaller churches. Vermont comes in as the forty-ninth urbanized state at 38.9 percent,⁷ and New Hampshire at fortieth with 60.3 percent.⁸ Though much more urbanized than its neighbors, New Hampshire is still very rural compared to much of the United States.

Thus the members of the evangelical church in northern New England are geographically spread out. For that reason, in addition to a high number of “nones,” a relatively small population attends church services regularly. Also the lack of evangelicals as a percentage of the population in northern New England typically creates smaller than average churches. These are usually divided churches in need of unity.

The Importance of the Project

The Importance of the Project to the Researcher

Denominations are at best extra-biblical and at worst a way to show just how dysfunctional the church is as a whole. There are unfortunate but necessary separations within the church, such as from denominations and ministers who no longer hold to the basic tenets of orthodox faith. Even so separation should only occur in times when there

⁶ “Maine: 2010 (PDF), 2010 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, CPH-2-5.” U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. 2012, p. 1, (accessed March 9, 2016)

⁷ “Vermont: 2010 (PDF), 2010 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, CPH-2-5,” U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. 2012. p. 1. (accessed March 9, 2016)

⁸ “New Hampshire: 2010 (PDF), 2010 Census of Population and Housing, Population and Housing Unit Counts, CPH-2-5,” U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. 2012. p. 1, (accessed March 9, 2016)

are legitimate core principles are at stake. To stand for truth and the Gospel means to stand opposed to lies and heresy. The researcher has never really grown to appreciate a need to divide over the lesser things. People come into conflict over small matters, traditions, and fears. Instead of putting these things aside just for a little while, and searching for clarity from the Holy Spirit in how to react, people find reasons to separate.

The solution then, the researcher believes, is building relationships between churches that can agree on orthodoxy, thereby allowing the truth of the Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to begin to heal these divides and calm any fears. It is important to the researcher to find unity in the body of Christ for the sake of church health, for the sake of the church witness, and for the sake of the Gospel that Christ has laid before His church. The researcher has seen a number of church bodies plateau or fail. At times this is due to circumstances beyond their control, but often these troubles are due to a church being inwardly focused to a fault. Inward focus often means ignoring those in the world who need Christ and the larger body of Christ who might have been able to help them. Many times this need not be and interchurch unity is a vital step in any church becoming what it was meant to be. These reasons are what makes this project so important to the researcher.

The Importance of the Project to the Immediate Ministry Context

The researcher's ministry context is as one of a number of pastors to a small community in Maine. This community is made up of four towns that have a population collectively of less than 6,000. In this area about half of the churches would consider themselves evangelical yet have very little to do with each other. Over the past six years,

things have somewhat improved. There is now a monthly pastor's breakfast and once a month some of the churches get together in an evening service to sing hymns.

Even so there is very little interchurch community development apart from this once a month event, attended by only a fraction of those who make up these local churches. As well, there are still other evangelical churches that have no interest in even that interchurch activity. No interchurch evangelism or outreach has been implemented in an area that is economically depressed and at best spiritually stagnant for at least the past two decades.

This spiritual stagnancy and a need for spiritual renewal in the researcher's immediate ministry context is supported by the statistics which can be summed up in three demographic facts about northern New England: the first is the obvious—disintegration of church communities; secondly, the growing number of “nones,” people with no religious affiliation; finally, the relatively small number of both evangelical Christians and church attenders compared to the rest of the country.

The researcher believes an essential element for spiritual renewal for the church in northern New England, which these towns represent in part, are evangelical churches coming together as the body of Christ. These churches need to develop a real Christian community and promote the Gospel without having to give up what makes them distinct. However, many times this belief has been met with suspicion, disregard, and even antagonism. The importance of this project to the researcher's ministry context is the belief that if real unity can be achieved then not only will these local churches become more Christ-like, but also many unchurched people may come to Christ and Christ will be glorified.

The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large

A lack of cooperation between local churches is not a new, isolated, or localized phenomenon, in the areas of outreach and interchurch community development; it is a sizable part of church history. Whether in northern New England or elsewhere this issue should be addressed. The importance of this project to the church at large is to give a small glimpse into the reasons divisions between evangelical churches have occurred in northern New England and to understand and apply these insights to heal similar divisions in other church settings.

The importance of this project to the church at large can also be understood in terms of its biblical nature. Unity, cooperation, outreach, and community development are all stressed in Scripture, for example in John 17, Acts 2, and Ephesians 2. If Scripture is the primary source of doctrine and practice for the evangelical church at large, then what Scripture stresses should have an impact on the evangelical church as a whole. The biblical argument for unity should be especially compelling if this is something the church has not often done well.

Jesus Christ said the church is meant to be salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16). Salt brings with it the idea of making the world better and light brings with it the idea of drawing people to Christ. Even so, too many of those outside the church only see a church that is divided. Hard questions must be asked. Are these divisions important? Is not working with other local churches doing some good? Is the church at large and the Gospel benefiting from division? The answers to these questions, whether in northern New England or elsewhere, should compel critical assessment, and changes should then be made.

Data and Methodology

Nature of the Research

The project undertaken was qualitative in nature. As well, multiple case studies were the main methods employed in three separate community settings. Multiple case studies were considered to be sound and helpful methods in dealing with the subproblems that arose from the projects main problem. The primary tools which were used were personal interviews, questionnaires, documents, and observational field notes.

The first subproblem was to discover the expectations of Scripture regarding normative, biblical, interchurch cooperation and outreach should be. The second subproblem was to review relevant literature corresponding to interdenominational cooperation and outreach. The third subproblem was to, through interviews and evaluation, explore and define reasons why some small evangelical churches do not cooperate with each other. The fourth subproblem was to, through interviews and evaluation, identify and explore effective models and examples where interchurch cooperation works. The fifth and final subproblem was to identify what principles can and should be applied to small evangelical churches in northern New England to solve this inadequacy of interchurch cooperation. These five subproblems address this project's main problem.

Primary data was gathered to address both the problem and subproblems. This included on-site interviews with 21 pastors and/or key church members. These pastors and church members represented a majority of evangelical churches in the three communities studied. It also included personal observations recorded in field notes, and the responses from the questionnaires administered. Secondary data was also gathered to

address both the problem and subproblems. This included demographic and census data as well as biblical, theological, and secular literature dealing with issues relevant to the problem of this project. Lastly, the secondary data included relevant church documents from on-site visits.

This project was completed over the course of many months. The first step was to review the relevant biblical and theological literature to determine the nature of unity and cooperation in the New Testament. Then the researcher examined the issues that arose in the New Testament church when unity and cooperation were disregarded. Lastly, the researcher studied how the New Testament authors responded to both unity and disunity in the church.

The second step was to review the relevant literature related to the study to determine the nature of evangelical interchurch cooperation and outreach in modern times. Secondly, the researcher studied the limits of interchurch cooperation and outreach. Finally, the researcher examined the religious setting and history of northern New England.

The third step in the research was to arrange meetings to interview the selected contributors. When personal interviews were impractical or declined by the participants then online questionnaires were administered in their place. Though there was research done among both the ministers and the laity of the churches, ministers made up the majority of the interviews and interactions. These ministers and laity were chosen from three northern New England multi-town geographical settings, one of which is where the researcher is a pastor. These churches are each at different stages in the process of interchurch/interdenominational fellowship, cooperation, and outreach.

At these meetings the researcher first conducted personal interviews with the ministers or laity. The researcher then explored the interviewees beliefs about the necessity of interchurch/interdenominational fellowship, cooperation, and outreach. Then the researcher examined given reasons why interchurch/interdenominational fellowship, cooperation, and outreach were not effectively occurring. Finally, the researcher explored effective models where interchurch/interdenominational fellowship, cooperation, and outreach were effectively occurring. In particular, pastoral and cooperate interchurch meetings were attended and observed with permission. Field notes were taken by the researcher.

The fourth step then in research was to collect, organize, and analyze all the data gathered. This was done in order to identify what principles can and should be applied to small evangelical churches in northern New England to solve this inadequacy of church cooperation in the areas of outreach and interchurch community development. The fifth and final step in the research was applying principles discovered in evident patterns found in the study and field research, and make recommendations for increasing interchurch cooperation.

Using Scripture and then relevant literature on the subject of interchurch cooperation and unity, the researcher came to a basic understanding of biblical and principled evangelical interchurch cooperation. Then using field research from three separate geographical areas containing multiple churches, and from multiple pastors and laity, established positive and negative examples of interchurch unity, or lack thereof. From there the researcher compiled the data, discovered patterns of church behavior, and made recommendations to increase interchurch unity for the future of Christ's kingdom.

CHAPTER TWO: A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR UNITY

The Scriptures declare and affirm the need for unity in the body of Christ.

Nowhere in Scripture does Christ envision His church as anything other than the singular body of Christ. The Apostle Paul declared Christ's headship over His unified church: "And he (Christ) is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent" (Col. 1:18).¹ This verse is likely part of a larger hymn that spans Colossians 1:15-20 which the Apostle Paul incorporated because of its importance to and affirmation by the early church.² He makes it clear to the reader that unity in Christ and under Christ is one of the most vital aspects of ecclesiastical theology.

This most basic and critical teaching of the early church states that Christ is the head, source, and origin of life in the church.³ Unity is of such great importance that he both writes of it in the majority of his epistles and commands that it be put into constant practice, such as in First Corinthians and Romans. In Paul's writings, this body called the church should be viewed then as a living entity which Christ is to control and direct as it carries out His work upon the earth.⁴ F. F. Bruce writes, "The Colossians are ... members

¹ All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the *English Standard Version*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. Edited by Gordon D. Fee, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 66.

³ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 68.

⁴ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 68,70.

of one world-wide people of God ... (and) the metaphor of a human body is utterly appropriate to express not only mutual interdependence ...but also, as here, an organic and dependent relation to Christ himself.”⁵ Anything less verges on gross misinterpretation of Scripture.

So as Christ the head gives the body life and direction, the body, which is the church, should then conform to His image and will in unity under His direction. This truth is not only confirmed here but it is evident throughout the New Testament. It is understood that different cities, countries, and cultures would of course have different styles and different ways of handling non-critical issues. However, Christian denominations which worship the same Lord and Savior and are located near to each other and yet have no positive working relationship because they are opposed on points of non-critical doctrine and polity, are practicing a disunity simply not found in Scripture. It is not what Christ intended; it is in fact unbiblical. Most churches, clergy, and parishioners would agree with this sentiment, although with the caveat that the solution is often to agree with my particular beliefs and even at times to unify under my traditions. This outcome in the end produces nothing but more contention and disunity.

Limits to Unity

Unity in the body of Christ is an important expression of God’s love, but there are biblical limits to unity which must be addressed. In the later writings of the New Testament, especially in the Epistles of John, there was necessary separation from heretical elements in the church. One of these cases is found in Second John. The elder in Second John opens with a greeting and in verses 4-6 writes of love and truth and how

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Edited by Leon Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 73-4.

those two facets of the Gospel connect uniquely together. In Second John 1:7-11 a problem is brought forward, and the elder makes it clear that some deceivers among them are not walking in love and truth and accordingly writes of the limits of unity:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.(2 John 1:7-11).

In Second John, the elder wrote that the situation of the church was one where the apostle's and church's authority was under attack.⁶ The elder himself, as well as being an authority in the church, was being challenged by heretical elements within the church. These heretics denied the most basic tenets of Christianity.⁷ This was neither a new nor a singular event. Earlier in church history, Jewish Christians were claiming a need for the Old Testament to be kept in tandem with faith in Christ. Paul utterly condemned this in the strongest terms in His letter to the Galatians.⁸ Both in that case and in Second John, false teachers were coming to house churches and spreading their false doctrine. Thomas Johnson writes that "The letters of John were called forth, therefore, by this crisis of the succession of the false teachers...Second John warns a particular church against

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, Edited by F.F. Bruce, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 10-11.

⁷ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 10-11.

⁸ Galatians 1:6-10, 2:11-21

receiving the itinerant secessionist teachers and urges their exclusion from hospitality.”⁹ The elder commands this as an act of protection against false teachers and their doctrine.

It would appear that the elder feared both a split in the church and that, if false teachers were received, many in the church would no longer practice the Christian faith and love.¹⁰ Already it appears that various small groups calling themselves Christian had been affected and had become heretical.¹¹ These false teachers and those they were leading astray rejected aspects of who Christ is and denied essential aspects of the Gospel.¹² This is something that the church should not tolerate and is considered heresy and deviation from truth.¹³

In verse 7, they had “gone out into the world,” which means they had separated from the community.¹⁴ They had done this by accepting and teaching false doctrines about Christ,¹⁵ they “do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh;” (2 John 1:7) essentially they denied Jesus’ full humanity.¹⁶ Most likely they were early Docetists, a sect who believed Christ only appeared to be human.¹⁷ Another possibility was that they

⁹ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2, and 3 John*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 12.

¹⁰ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 69.

¹¹ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 70.

¹² Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 70.

¹³ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 74.

¹⁴ Johnson, 155-6.

¹⁵ Johnson, 155-6.

¹⁶ Johnson, 155-6.

¹⁷ Johnson, 155-6.

were early Gnostics¹⁸ who were similarly heretical. Either way they are called “antichrist,” not the Antichrist, but those opposed to, against, or substitutes for Christ.¹⁹ Likewise, the reference to “everyone who goes ahead,” refers to leaving the Christian faith for what they believe to be progressive.²⁰

In response, the elder prohibits the church from letting these false teachers come into their house.²¹ This refers to more than just a house but is a reference to the early church meeting in a home church setting.²² Therefore the prohibition refers to them entering a church and spreading their false doctrines.

By the late first century, the need was understood by the early church to separate from heretical elements. This separation does not end in the first century but, post-New Testament, the earliest church documents affirm this truth as well. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, also known as the *Didache*, one of the earliest church documents outside the New Testament, states “Whosoever, therefore, cometh and teacheth you all these things that have been said before, receive him. But if the teacher himself turn and teach another doctrine to the destruction of this, hear him not.”²³ The early manuscript continues in this vein commanding the early church to keep false teachers out of homes as well.

¹⁸ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 70.

¹⁹ Johnson, 156.

²⁰ Johnson, 157-8.

²¹ Johnson, 158-9.

²² Johnson, 158-9.

²³ *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Fourth Printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 11:1-2.

Ultimately the elder John and the church leadership after him excluded teachers who had already excluded themselves from Christ from participating in the church. These teachers placed themselves in this situation by rejecting and leaving the orthodox faith. So in order to stop the spread of heresy, there were biblical limits placed on church unity. This meant that fellowship and cooperation with a false teacher as part of the church body would cease.

The same is true today. Unity despite unorthodox teachings would undermine the Gospel and would not be Christian unity in Christ. It would be a unity opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as seen in Second John. For example, unity between Christian churches that affirm the bodily resurrection of Christ would not make much sense with churches that do not affirm a bodily resurrection. That belief is fundamental to Christianity itself. Among evangelical churches that disagree over non-critical issues, there should be an ability to find a measure of unity and cooperation in the areas of outreach and interchurch community development, if and when they unify on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The guiding principles that clarify where unity begins and ends must be found in the theological definition of what an evangelical Christian is. The base doctrines of orthodoxy must be affirmed and taught by any churches which seek to unify on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Moral issues are not as easily defined. The Ten Commandments is a logical place to start, but even the ideal day to keep and how to keep the Sabbath differs among evangelicals. It may be best to say then that evangelical churches would at a minimum need to agree on the traditional Christian views to develop biblical unity.

The Biblical and Theological Basis for Unity

Numerous Scriptures provide a strong theological basis for church unity. Christ gave a foundation for the necessity of unity among participants in a joint effort for anything to truly succeed (Matt. 12:22-28). The backdrop of this passage records the growing tension between Christ and the religious leaders, especially the Pharisees. The passage then opens with a man who was “demon-oppressed” and healed by Christ. The Pharisees reacted negatively to this healing by suggesting it did not come about by the power of God (12:24). Instead they said that this miracle came about by the power of Beelzebul. The title “Beelzebul” or “Beelzebub” literally means “Lord of the flies,”²⁴ which suggests that Christ is Beelzebul or at least working by him to do this deed.

Christ responded by asserting the general principle of unity: “Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?’” (Matt. 12:25-26). Jesus’ response emphasized an important universal principle: unity is necessary in any kingdom, even in the kingdom of hell. Without unity and cooperation a kingdom cannot stand. D. A. Carson writes, “The argument is clear: any kingdom, city, or household that develops internal strife will destroy itself.”²⁵ Robert Mounce agrees, “Kingdoms divided are bound to collapse. ... If one part of Satan’s kingdom is expelling another, there will soon be nothing left.”²⁶ Jesus continued to press His accusers by asking, “By whom do your sons

²⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 124.

²⁵ D. A. Carson, “Matthew” in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin, Expositor’s Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 288.

²⁶ Mounce, 117.

cast them out?” (12:27). Both in His logic and by personalizing this to the Pharisees, He essentially eliminates any further attack upon His Person and miracle at least for that moment.

The teaching in verses 25-26 is critical for an understanding of cooperation among the whole body of Christ. Though the text is dealing with the accusation that Christ cast out demons in the name of Beelzebul, He takes the dispute a step further by asking “How can a kingdom divided against itself stand?” Logically it cannot. Any group must work in unison for it to succeed. The same principle should be applied to the Kingdom of God and the church as a whole. Unfortunately this principle is often not applied.

The New Testament records the struggle of the early church with issues of unity and division. The epistles to the Romans and Ephesians record Paul’s words to these churches divided between Jews and Gentiles, struggling to find unity in Christ despite ethnic, religious, and cultural differences. Paul prayed for unity and harmony in a larger section about unity between Jew and Gentile (Rom. 15:5-7.)²⁷ In this passage Paul gives insight into the need for harmony in the church. The first item of note is that true harmony among believers is from God and that one accord can only be achieved in Christ (15:5).²⁸ The English Standard Version uses the word “harmony” but according to Douglas Moo this is a much stronger command: αὐτός φρονέω: “The word suggests a

²⁷ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Edited by D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 500.

²⁸ Morris, 501.

mind-set, a way of looking at life and steering our course accordingly.”²⁹ Paul asserted that the Roman church needed to heal the discord and unify in their common faith.

Paul connected this “harmony” or “same mind” to an aspect of healing found in the worship of God (15:6). Leon Morris wrote that when “the church gives itself over to glorifying God, there is a deep and satisfying unity.”³⁰ This unity in worship is then connected to the promotion of God’s glory when the Lord welcomes a new member into the body (15:7).³¹ When there is a new member he or she should also be welcomed by His church.³² “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (15:7). The church is commanded to welcome one another, meaning to receive each other as brothers and sisters, consequently eliminating attitudes of division.³³

In his letter to the Ephesian church Paul addressed the issue of unity in the body of Christ again. As was the case with the Roman church, the unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church is at the forefront. The epistle contains practical instructions for maintaining unity within the body.³⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes that the key theme of unity is laid out in Ephesians 1:10,³⁵ “a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in

²⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, Edited by Walter A. Elwell, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 199.

³⁰ Morris, 502.

³¹ Morris, 503.

³² Morris, 503.

³³ Moo, 199.

³⁴ Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, Edited by W. Ward Gasque, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 228.

³⁵ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity* (East Peoria, IL: Versa Press, 2014), 17.

him, things in heaven and things on earth.” (Eph. 1:10). From here the epistle and its theme progress in dealing directly with cultural and ethnic differences.

In Ephesians 2:13-22, Paul dealt specifically with cultural differences between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews and Gentiles had different customs and social norms, and they both looked at the other with distaste. Yet Paul declared the breaking down of hostility that has put a wall between people prior to Christ (2:14) and “one new man in the place of two” (2:15). It is in Christ that His new creation of individuals is re-formed into a new community despite previous societal differences.³⁶ Jews and Gentiles are now one body in Christ:³⁷ states that, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). Paul declared that this unity is created together as a new holy temple of the Lord, where His Spirit dwells and all other distinctions are secondary: “In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21).

Paul also affirmed and discussed unity later in the letter (Eph. 4:1-16). Here in the passage with a He listed personal attributes essential for unity (4:1-2).³⁸ The two most notable are humility, which is “that attitude of mind that enables one to see people other than oneself,”³⁹ and gentleness, which is consideration toward others.⁴⁰ If these attributes

³⁶ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 299.

³⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 300.

³⁸ Patzia, 229.

³⁹ Patzia, 229.

⁴⁰ Patzia, 230.

were regularly practiced by the church unity would be more greatly experienced in the church.⁴¹

Paul expressed the oneness of the church found in Christ as one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father (4:3-7). Therefore, the church is called to be and should be an expression of this oneness. The church's common Christian faith and unity should be evident as well. What is further expressed in this passage is that this oneness is found only as a byproduct of Christian faith: it only exists because of Christ and His gift of the cross and Holy Spirit.⁴² So then the church is not called to create this unity but maintain it.⁴³

Paul connected unity with the individual believer maturing in the faith (4:12-13).⁴⁴ Arthur Patzia writes, "Believers are to grow out of their individualism into the cooperate oneness of the person of Christ."⁴⁵ This maturing is further associated with keeping doctrinally pure (4:14).⁴⁶ Throughout the epistles, Paul reaffirmed the teaching that unity is never at the expense of the Gospel; the Gospel is where it is founded. Paul concluded the passage with the teaching that the individual must learn to live as part of the greater body of Christ (4:15-16):⁴⁷ "from whom the whole body, joined and held

⁴¹ Patzia, 230.

⁴² Lloyd-Jones, 24, 26-27.

⁴³ Lloyd-Jones, 27.

⁴⁴ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 350.

⁴⁵ Patzia, 244.

⁴⁶ Lloyd-Jones, 49.

⁴⁷ Patzia, 246.

together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” (Eph. 4:16).

One of the most important passages about church unity is John 17. Just a few hours before His crucifixion, Jesus at Gethsemane prays for His followers:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17:20-23).

The prayer of Jesus occurs between His teaching about the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and all believers and His Passion. Its placement is important because a prayer in the middle of such significant events shows the heart of Christ. His church was the central reason why He went to the cross. He died for the justification of those who will believe in Him. He was crucified for those present and future believers, referring to all who believe regardless of time and place.⁴⁸ Andreas Köstenberger discusses the importance of this, “His prayer is for their unity. For it is Jesus’ desire that through the unity of His followers the world may come to realize that the Father sent him.”⁴⁹

It is also remarkable, as Lloyd-Jones writes, that “we notice at once that the essential character of unity about which our Lord is speaking is that it is comparable to the unity that exists between the Father and Son.”⁵⁰ The believers are still distinct but are now founded in Christ, as Carson writes, “one in purpose, in love, in action undertaken

⁴⁸ Lloyd-Jones, 9.

⁴⁹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective*, Edited by Walter A. Elwell, *Encountering Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 172.

⁵⁰ Lloyd-Jones, 11.

with and for one another, in joint submission to the revelation received.”⁵¹ From His prayer it is clear that belief in Christ brings the believer into a new state of unity as a member of the family of God.⁵² This is a new state of being in the unity, which is the work of the Spirit; as Lloyd-Jones notes, there is no unity apart from the “fundamental operation of the Holy Spirit of God, who creates within the believers of the truth this new nature.”⁵³ It is unity based on being a family, which is much more than an association; it is relationship of central emphasis and essence,⁵⁴ of who they are in Christ.

In the family of God, there is essential unity in their common source of life, which in itself is meant as a witness to the world.⁵⁵ Köstenberger writes, “Unity (together with love) constitutes an essential prerequisite for evangelism.”⁵⁶ John 17:20-23 then is Jesus asking for oneness or unity among His church, which He connects with the world understanding the Gospel. A family in spiritual and common unity is compared with the Godhead here. Hence, Christ moves from the general principle of unity in any kingdom for it to succeed to unity among believers that bridges ethnic differences. Consequently, they will become the family of God based upon the very nature of the Godhead.

What must then be sought after and prayed for are believers who may attend different churches yet still associate with one another and be as family to each other.

⁵¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Edited by D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 568.

⁵² Merrill C. Tenney, “John” in *John and Acts*, Edited by Frank Gaebelein, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 167.

⁵³ Lloyd-Jones, 13.

⁵⁴ Lloyd-Jones, 13.

⁵⁵ Tenney, 167.

⁵⁶ Köstenberger, 172.

Furthermore, John 17:23 encourages community development and unity, especially in cooperative outreach. Though this is not explicit here nor anywhere in the New Testament, it is implicit that division should not rule the true church. Unity in Christ should be the goal, as Christ prayed, and should naturally lead to a positive evangelistic effort. If the oneness of the church is connected by Christ to the world believing in Him, then interchurch cooperation is universally beneficial. It does not simply benefit those who currently make up the church but it impacts those being evangelized. There is then a link between unity and those in the world accepting Christ. Again, this unity is affirmed by Paul: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).

According to Paul there is an obligation for unity in the body. In this passage he uses the phrases, “one spirit,” “one mind,” and “striving side by side. As important as it appears in the English translation, in the original Greek the importance is all the more stressed. The English Standard Version translates *πολιτεύεσθε* as “let,” whereas the New American Standard Bible translates this word as the imperative, “conduct yourselves,” by conveying the idea to “live as citizens” and more generally “live as members of a community.”⁵⁷ This is an intentional command for unity. Bruce states, “A life worthy of the gospel should be a life of harmony.”⁵⁸ The body of Christ is a shared common life in Christ among its members,⁵⁹ as Paul writes, “standing firm in one spirit with one mind.”

⁵⁷ F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, Edited by W. Ward Gasque, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 59.

⁵⁸ Bruce, *Philippians*, 56.

⁵⁹ Bruce, *Philippians*, 56.

That phrase, “in one spirit,” ἐν εἰς πνεῦμα, is important as well, since it is not likely referring to the Spirit of God; but as believers they are to be in one spirit together.⁶⁰ A final phrase of interest in this verse are the words translated “striving side by side.” Here in both the English and the Greek, unity in thought and action is strongly suggested by the words “striving side by side,” since συναθλέω refers to “contending together,” a “joint effort athletic metaphor of teamwork.”⁶¹

This verse demonstrates the expectation for unity in the church. This kind of unity is not abnormal nor is it something unattainable. Early in the church’s development, it was normative and expected. Luke wrote of this:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

This passage is a model for the church in Luke’s day.⁶² There was a strong emphasis on “fellowship,” κοινωνία, the sharing in together based on God holding the church together.⁶³ This is the key word the Apostle Paul used in First Corinthians to explain the unity found in the Lord’s Table. This deep fellowship and togetherness was one of the four primary parts of the early church along with prayer, breaking of bread, and the

⁶⁰ Bruce, *Philippians*, 59.

⁶¹ Homer A. Kent Jr., “Philippians” in *Ephesians through Philemon*, Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein, Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 118-119.

⁶² David J. Williams, *Acts*, Edited by W. Ward Gasque, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 59.

⁶³ Williams, *Acts*, 59.

apostles teaching.⁶⁴ Fellowship in particular was so critically important that early in the formation of the church, the body “had all things in common,” in verses 44-45.⁶⁵ Because many in the church were facing extreme poverty, even their property was pooled together to aid the community.⁶⁶ This was likely part of the reason why more members were added “day by day.”⁶⁷ It would seem that the thriving compassionate unity and fellowship had an evangelistic component by meeting needs of those primarily in the body, and secondarily those outside the body.

It also must be noted that this fellowship was intrinsically attached to apostolic teaching. The church was connected by what they believed, which only added to the faith and fellowship.⁶⁸ “All who believed were together” (2:44) stresses a deep oneness.⁶⁹ The early church was unified around their purpose, identity, and faith. This is seen again as Luke continued to record the events surrounding the early church in Acts 4:32-37. In this passage, there are many common elements of unity: care for one another, apostolic teaching, sharing of possessions. The church was “of one heart and soul.”

Acts 4:32-37 is a close but imperfect parallel to Acts 2:42-47.⁷⁰ There is the addition of the story about Barnabas, who epitomized the church community’s fellowship

⁶⁴ Williams, *Acts*, 59.

⁶⁵ Williams, *Acts*, 61.

⁶⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, Edited by Gordon D. Fee, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 74.

⁶⁷ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 75.

⁶⁸ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 73.

⁶⁹ Williams, 62.

⁷⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Edited by Leon Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 114.

and love for each other because of Christ. “Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet” (4:36-37). Barnabas acted as the example to the church of how the wealthy cared for the poor among them.⁷¹

Luke wrote in Acts 4:32 that “the full number,” *πλήθος* meaning all,⁷² “of those who believed were of one heart and soul ... they had everything in common.” This was not full-fledge communalism but a voluntary willingness to freely meet needs of others.⁷³ Likely, this was in part due to a belief Jesus was coming very soon.⁷⁴ Whatever additional reasons for this fellowship and solidarity, verse 32 declares that the early church exemplified what Jesus called the two greatest commandments:⁷⁵ to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.⁷⁶ This kind of love was possible because of their unity in Christ. Godly social ethics were fostered by orthodoxy and the unity of the early church.

The biblical and theological basis for unity should not be understated; it is a frequent, vibrant, and essential concern of the New Testament. Christ first presents unity in the Gospel of Matthew as a logical need for any kingdom. A kingdom divided and unwilling to cooperate will certainly fall. In the Gospel of John unity within the body is declared to be the will of God. This unity is so important that while on the way to the

⁷¹ Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 101.

⁷² Williams, *Acts*, 92.

⁷³ Williams, *Acts*, 92.

⁷⁴ Williams, *Acts*, 92.

⁷⁵ Marshall, *Acts*, 115.

⁷⁶ Matthew 22:36-40

cross, Christ specifically prays for it to be attained by all believers. Unity is also a work of the Spirit, making a new family in Christ out of different peoples and nations.

Therefore, unity reflects the Godhead itself. Christian unity and cooperation is both an orthodox apostolic teaching and an intrinsic social betterment. It builds the community of Christ and is also directly related to evangelism as an apologetic for Christ. The New Testament declares and demands biblical unity and cooperation within the church. Both for its individual members and cooperate bodies it is a command of God, connected with the Great Commission and positive church health.

It is then in this biblical unity both commanded and modeled that the believer in Christ finds the need for interchurch unity and cooperation in their local church.

Evangelism, Christian love, and respect are incomplete without this unity. Unity is the basis for community development and outreach in an interchurch setting.

Disunity Condemned

As unity in Christ is strongly affirmed in the New Testament, disunity is equally condemned. Disunity arises when members of the church find unbiblical reasons to divide either implicitly or explicitly. This problem comes up throughout the New Testament and is often written of in the Apostle Paul's epistles. In writing to the Corinthians Paul had to deal with numerous issues of division. Disunity took many forms in the early Corinthian church: for example, leadership quarrels starting (1 Cor. 1,) discord at the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11,) and division due to ungodly attitudes toward spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.) The last of these led Paul to discuss the nature of the body as both unified in Christ yet containing a diversity of gifts and persons.

In First Corinthians there is an affirmation of how the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-14). However, in verses 15-26 Paul condemns the belief that there are parts of the body and members in Christ who are unnecessary or should be excluded. The passage begins with this ongoing theme which is throughout much of Paul's writings; that there is one body, but many members make up that body in Christ. Therefore, the body is a unified entity with many parts; all of which should be submissive unto Christ.⁷⁷ Unity then under Christ should dominate over the diversity of those individual parts or members.⁷⁸ In the situation in Corinth that diversity was in disarray and out of control.⁷⁹

The passage continues his thought process that there is oneness in the body (1 Cor. 12:13). Namely all members of the body have received the Holy Spirit, which is the reason for their commonality.⁸⁰ This common experience is expressed in two parallel sentences:⁸¹ "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:13). The phrase that begins this verse, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body," is reaffirmed at the end of the verse in that "all were made to drink of one Spirit."⁸² Fee concludes that what is being paralleled in this verse refers to conversion, and the reception of the Holy

⁷⁷ Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians*, Edited W. Ward Gasque, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 263.

⁷⁸ Soards, 263.

⁷⁹ Soards, 263.

⁸⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Edited by F.F. Bruce, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 603.

⁸¹ Fee, 603.

⁸² Fee, 603.

Spirit.⁸³ Paul is explaining to the Corinthians that their common conversion, reception of the Spirit, and immersion remakes them into one body, aside from anything that might keep them separated.⁸⁴ Old things are no longer important to the “common life in the Spirit,” they are now in one body.⁸⁵ Despite social boundaries and varied backgrounds before conversion there should be unity.⁸⁶ They are now one in Christ.⁸⁷ Even so Paul in verse 14 recognized that they retain individuality that is never abandoned. Any tension then from this unity in the midst of their individuality, is not the work nor a result of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸ It is a humanly created and enemy inspired issue.

Paul applied the importance and purpose of the body of Christ to the immediate concerns and divisions over giftings in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 12:15). He then contrasted a foot and a hand and continues to expand upon the metaphor in verse 16, contrasting an ear instead of an eye. All are necessary; and if the whole body were simply one and not the other(s), the body would be in dysfunction and incomplete, according to verses 17-19. The church needed unity regardless of its member’s individual differences, otherwise what would exist would only be a monstrosity.⁸⁹ Paul summarized up his initial thoughts: “As it is, there are many parts, yet one body” (1 Cor. 12:20). The whole

⁸³ Fee, 605.

⁸⁴ Fee, 606.

⁸⁵ Fee, 606.

⁸⁶ Soards, 264.

⁸⁷ Soards, 264.

⁸⁸ Fee, 607.

⁸⁹ Fee, 609-610.

is greater than its parts. Yet the parts exist and have importance in the whole, not simply in spite of their difference but because of their differences.

Paul then moved from the dysfunction of disassociating oneself from the body or creating a strict standardization, to the dysfunction of cutting off other members from the body. Both of which are equally condemned and not Christ-like. Paul wrote that those parts, members, or persons whom one might see as unnecessary, verse 22 says “weaker,” Paul called “indispensable.” Furthermore, in verse 23, those that seem to be “less honorable,” Paul stated the individual should bestow “greater honor,” signifying the importance of all in the body. Fee adds, “if one removed an organ because it appeared weak, the body would cease to be whole. So with the church. All parts are necessary, no matter what one may think.”⁹⁰

Paul also declared that the unity in the body is purposefully diverse as a sovereign act of God.⁹¹ There is a key word in verse 24, “composed.” Paul stated, “but God has so composed the body,” συγκεράννυμι meaning mixing together or to unite. W. Harold Mare further states that “God has united or blended the members effectively into one body”⁹² The body of Christ has been arranged by God the way it is to create mutual dependency upon one another. Thus the whole is hurt by the absence of different parts of

⁹⁰ Fee, 613.

⁹¹ Soards, 265.

⁹² W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians” in *Romans through Galatians*, Edited by Frank Gaebelein. Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 266.

the body.⁹³ God has done this not to create strife but that the body may function by mutually meeting one another's needs,⁹⁴ on this point First Corinthians 12:25-27 is key:

that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor. 12:25-27).

There should be no division among the real body of Christ. Any division is not only condemned by Paul but is painted as ludicrous. It is only for the sake of dysfunction itself that the true body of Christ should be divided, which is absurd. In contrast, it is in the interest of all who follow Christ that the cause of unity be undertaken for both the body and those outside the body.

First Corinthians is not the only letter where Paul wrote of the body of Christ. Romans 12:3-13 also contains this body metaphor for the church, and an equal condemnation of disunity among believers. Paul wrote in this passage about how believers should act toward other Christians.⁹⁵ He used the terms: love (v.9), affection (v.10), showing honor (v.10), and hospitality (v.13). All of which are to be applied to the body as a whole from the individual member. This is under the backdrop of a warning in Romans 12:3: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Rom. 12:3). Unfortunately this sober judgment of others was not occurring in the Roman church as a whole. Just the opposite was all too normal in the Roman church at the time of the Apostle Paul's

⁹³ Soards, 265.

⁹⁴ Fee, 614-15.

⁹⁵ Morris, 436.

writing. The church was experiencing social and ethnic divisions. In part these divisions were causing disunity because each group (Jews and Gentiles) thought themselves better than the other.

According to Paul neither was better than the other despite what each group believed. In verses 4-5 of the passage, Paul uses the body metaphor to write of the differing functions of its many members. All functions are necessary to allow the body of Christ to be what it should be. Verse 5 clarifies this point as Paul wrote, “so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.” (Rom. 12:5). Douglas Moo comments on this verse when he writes, “Christians are unavoidably tied to each other in that one body the church. We must view ourselves not as isolated individuals but as parts of one organism.”⁹⁶ Of particular interest is the phrase in verse 5, “individually members one of another.” There should be so much unity in the diversity of the body that each member belongs to the others; and interrelatedness is of such importance that without it, membership within the body is meaningless.⁹⁷ Then Paul provides examples of spiritual gifts and the relational necessity of each one, all under the foundation of Christian love.⁹⁸ Paul navigates the Romans away from their petty divisions to appropriate relational Christian unity.

More explicit divisions are detailed again in First Corinthians 1:10-13. In this passage individuals in the Corinthian church were creating dissention over who they believed to be the greater leader. They were also fighting over whom they would then

⁹⁶ Moo, 179.

⁹⁷ Morris, 439.

⁹⁸ Morris, 443.

follow individually or in small groups. In verse 10 the Apostle Paul asks the church to repent of this disunity. As he appeals for this repentance, in the same verse he commands numerous times for a renewed unity to be found among them.⁹⁹ He writes, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Cor. 1:10). The word he uses for divisions is *σχίσμα* literally meaning tears or cracks.¹⁰⁰ The concept of the church breaking, or of coming apart, is easily associated with this word.

Paul reports in verse 11 the origin of this information is from “Chloe’s people,” and that what has been reported is that “quarreling” has occurred in the church, which Paul often lists as a vice, for example in Romans 1:29, 13:13, among other places.¹⁰¹ This “quarreling” over spiritual leaders has created an atmosphere of tension where people are picking sides and making choices about their leaders as individuals and not as the body.¹⁰² What is worse is that along with Paul, Apollos, and Cephas, Christ has been added to the list and marginalized. The Lord seems to have become just another leader to fight over.¹⁰³ This lowers Christ to a pawn, and not only does this miscommunicate the Gospel but it also misunderstands the nature of church leadership. All this disunity seems to be partaken in for the sake of a self-gratifying spiritual elitism.¹⁰⁴ This is condemned

⁹⁹ Fee, 53.

¹⁰⁰ Mare, 192.

¹⁰¹ Soards, 36.

¹⁰² Soards, 33.

¹⁰³ Soards, 33.

¹⁰⁴ Fee, 59.

not only by Paul but throughout Scripture. Matthew 6 is prime example of spiritual elitism, outside of Paul's writings.

Verse 13 then opens with a series of rhetorical questions.¹⁰⁵ The first of which asks, "is Christ divided," meaning distributed out, again as if has he been lowered to an option for leadership.¹⁰⁶ Paul is essentially calling on the Corinthians to recognize the absurdity of the question.¹⁰⁷ The next two questions he asks are, "was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul"? Clearly Paul's point is to show that division over lesser issues by choosing one leader over another denigrates Christ, misunderstands His unity, and ignores the Lord's centrality.¹⁰⁸

A final example of disunity in the church is found in Paul's epistle to the Philippians. This epistle is one of Paul's most positive, yet in Philippians 2:1-5, there is both affirmation of unity and condemnation of disunity. Both unity and disunity were present in different aspects of the church. In verse one, Paul writes of what the Gospel should produce in the church. He writes of encouragement in Christ, in a communal sense as Christians.¹⁰⁹ Paul writes of comfort from love in the Holy Spirit, and of affection in sympathy. He begins this passage with concern for unity of mind and mutual consideration of one another.¹¹⁰ Something that may not be easy, but in Christ's love and

¹⁰⁵ Soards, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Soards, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Fee, 60.

¹⁰⁸ Soards, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Bruce, *Philippians*, 65.

¹¹⁰ Bruce, *Philippians*, 61-62.

comfort it is made possible.¹¹¹ The church is then shown to be bound by the Spirit in a fellowship based upon love.¹¹² Hence any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy are meant to foster this oneness in the community for common purpose in Christ.¹¹³ Meaning as Kent writes, “their love for Christ and for their fellow believers (including Paul) ought to impel them to desist from divisiveness in any form... the fellowship produced by the Holy Spirit should stimulate the practical exercise of unity.”¹¹⁴ Paul lays out what is normal and expected in the unity that should take place in Philippi.¹¹⁵ From this positive opening he transitions to his discussion of unity to disunity in the epistle.

Beginning in verse 2 Paul branches out into an important contrast; first he states, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”¹¹⁶ He pleads for the Philippians to continue on in this unity, asking for unanimity of mind.¹¹⁷ This was not to deny differences of opinion, but to create a body where people will not lose their unity in Christ over those opinions.¹¹⁸ The contrast takes its full shape as he condemns disunity in verse 3. Philippians 2:3 states, “Do nothing

¹¹¹ Bruce, *Philippians*, 61-62.

¹¹² Bruce, *Philippians*, 61-62.

¹¹³ Bruce, *Philippians*, 61-62.

¹¹⁴ Kent, 121.

¹¹⁵ Kent, 121.

¹¹⁶ Philippians 2:2

¹¹⁷ Bruce, *Philippians*, 62.

¹¹⁸ Bruce, *Philippians*, 62.

from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, count others more significant than yourselves.” (Phil. 2:3).

Paul goes right to the heart of where disunity originates, putting oneself before others as an act of selfishness and conceit. Consequently Kent states, “consideration for others must precede concern for ourselves ... this will go far toward removing disharmony.”¹¹⁹ Indeed this is the same kind of humility that the atonement is based upon. Paul continued in his thought through verse 4 where he stated that the interest of others should be placed above the interest of self. The ultimate contrast then between unity and disunity is that of selfish ambition over and against humility that considers others better than oneself.¹²⁰ Paul then led the Philippians to the final command of this passage in verse five, to have the mind of Christ, which is a mind in unity with the church. Thus the command for unity over disunity is intrinsically linked to the mind of Christ in Who unity must have its core and place of origin.

So whether implicit or explicit, disunity causes a splintering within the church and is rightfully condemned. Instead of disunity members of the body are instructed to find unity in Christ. For the body of Christ the church is meant to be one. To a large degree today the church is separated through divisions in doctrine and polity. Yet among evangelical churches, there can be interchurch, interdenominational, community development and outreach. Not only can this bring much good to the local bodies themselves, it can also bring much good to the surrounding unchurched community. This

¹¹⁹ Kent, 122.

¹²⁰ Bruce, *Philippians*, 62-63.

harmony can bring much good to the Kingdom of God, as affirmed and directed by Scripture.

Theologically and biblically unity is critically important. It is commanded and modeled in Scripture for Christians of all ages. Even so, it must be unity based upon Christ and His Gospel; unity despite these things misses the point. At the same time, disunity over less important matters makes little sense, and it is also unbiblical. In Christ, and only under His precepts and in accordance with His Gospel and His Holy Spirit, can the unity the church was created for be achieved. Even across man-made divisions, interchurch love and fellowship can be a model and draw those outside the body to discover Christ.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF THE RELATED RESEARCH

Research and investigation are required to properly address what changes need to be made in the areas of evangelical interchurch evangelism and community development. This process first began with investigating how church unity has taken shape in the past and has been discussed in relevant literature. It also required an investigation into the trends and history of the church in northern New England. Therefore, related literature was reviewed, and the major area the researcher focused on was evangelical interchurch cooperation. Additionally, two subordinate areas researched and discussed are the limits of interchurch cooperation, and the religious setting and history of northern New England.

Evangelical Interchurch Cooperation

Karl Barth, the famous twentieth century theologian, believed unity was of vital importance to the church. He wrote:

Consider what the church is, what it ought to mean, for its own members, for those brought together within it through baptism, through the Word of God, through the Holy Communion; ‘the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth’ (1 Tim. 3:15). Can it and will it be, as such, continually imposing, credible, convincing to its members, if as a Church it has its being only in an array of various churches, each of which represents to the others a problem, a critic, a rival, possibly also a disturber and an enemy?¹

Barth believed that the church is one body meeting in different places, not the assortment of rivals it often appears to be.

¹ Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 8.

John Stott affirmed the same basic principle for evangelical churches. He noted that in the past 50 years, the evangelical movement has grown in every way except in cohesion.² There are many divided groups within the realm of evangelicalism, yet the question must be asked, are these divisions necessary?³ He writes in his book *Evangelical Truth* “Many of us evangelical Christians acquiesce too readily in our pathological tendency to fragment.”⁴ Some may hide behind the idea that despite this outward fragmentation, there is unity in the invisible church.⁵ Because of this mindset, Satan is allowed to become more successful dividing and conquering the church.⁶ Stott asks evangelicals to consider if they can preserve the evangelical faith while recognizing that “While holding with a good conscience whatever our particular understanding of the evangelical faith may be, is it not possible for us to acknowledge that what unites us as evangelical people is much greater than what divides us?”⁷ As evangelicalism abounds in division, the church needs greater discernment to understand the difference between evangelical essentials, which should not be compromised, and matters of secondary importance.⁸ Stott provides an interesting list of 12 secondary matters to consider not dividing over. They are what he refers to as, “adiaphora” or matters indifferent.⁹

² John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity & Faithfulness*, Edited by David Smith, Christian Doctrine in Global Perspective, rev ed (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 11.

³ Stott, 11-12.

⁴ Stott, 116.

⁵ Stott, 116.

⁶ Stott, 116.

⁷ Stott, 12.

⁸ Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity & Faithfulness*, 117.

⁹ Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity & Faithfulness*, 117-118.

Foundations for Unity

On the most basic theological level, disharmony in the church is a result of sin. However, God's mission and eternal plan is to bring reconciliation and peace to His people and the world.¹⁰ Paul writes that Christians are new creations in Christ. This entails unity with God and with one another.¹¹ Individually and as the church, God's people are meant to display God's will, nature, and desire to reconcile the world to Himself.¹² Nevertheless, unity is often viewed as of secondary importance, not essential to the faith.¹³ God's work of reconciliation and forgiveness is intended to replace division and disdain with unity and cooperation. This unity is not achieved by the efforts of the church itself, but is manifested by Holy Spirit.¹⁴

It is in the common experience of baptism that the individual Christian often first experiences solidarity with the church.¹⁵ Baptism is one of God's means to reinforce unity despite previous outward differences between believers before they came to faith.¹⁶ Baptism is a vital symbol of unity in Christ among the different individuals being baptized¹⁷ which should spur the believer on to greater cooperation with the body of

¹⁰ Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 20.

¹¹ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 24.

¹² Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 22-24, 26.

¹³ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 32.

¹⁴ Miguel Alvarez, "A Strategy for Achieving Cooperation among the Evangelical Bodies of Honduras," (D.Min. diss., Ashland Theological Seminary, 1993), 4.

¹⁵ Alvarez, 7.

¹⁶ Alvarez, 7.

¹⁷ Shane Clifton, "Ecumenism from the Bottom Up: A Pentecostal Perspective," (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 4 Fall 2012), 578.

Christ. The symbol of baptism is of washing, identity, and new life outside of one's self in Christ with other Christians, and it is meant to unify. Baptism well after its inception has been made a point of division. This division is outside of the original intention of Scripture and should not detract from its first intent of unity and new identity with Christ and His church. Unity originates with God but must be pursued by the church itself as God gives it direction. Subsequently, the body of Christ is not simply an organization but an organism in which there should be harmony.¹⁸ This harmony centers around Christ as the head of the body who brings health and life to it.¹⁹

Division in the church contradicts biblical reconciliation. Lukas Vischer writes, "For our witness to the gospel to be credible we must overcome the separation and bring to clear expression our common life in Christ."²⁰ Ronald Ziegler writes, "The unity of the church is given by her Lord. It is a unity of the Holy Spirit and of faith."²¹ Therefore as the Lord is the head of the church, this unity should be accepted by His followers. Unity is never isolated as something in and of itself, but it must be and continue to stay founded upon Christ and His mission.²² For unity to occur, acceptance of the truth and regeneration of the believer in Christ are necessary.²³

¹⁸ Alvarez, 8.

¹⁹ Alvarez, 8.

²⁰ Lukas Vischer, *Unity of the Church in the New Testament and Today*, Tra edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2010), 2.

²¹ Roland F. Ziegler, "Doctrinal unity and church fellowship," (*Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 3-4 2014), 77.

²² Lloyd-Jones, 70-77.

²³ Lloyd-Jones, 71-72.

The foundation of this belief that unity and cooperation are essential to the church is found consistently and clearly throughout the Bible. Unity is a theme from creation and until the Second Coming.²⁴ Every book in the Bible addresses either unity in general, unity among individuals for a common good, or unity in the Body of Christ,²⁵ (e.g., Ps. 133:1, Eccles. 4:9-12, Eph. 4:1-7). Likewise the two common ordinances or sacraments that nearly every Christian church participates in are baptism and the Lord's Table, known by various names from denomination to denomination. They are inherently symbols of the believer's acceptance of and unity in Christ.²⁶ Unity and church cooperation based on Christ are marks of the true church and God's children (Gal. 3:26-28).²⁷

A Brief History of Ecumenism

The history of modern church unity has been uneven at best. Since the Reformation, the number of denominations and divisions within the church has continued to grow without pause. In 1846 some evangelicals from diverse denominations and traditions came together hoping to reaffirm interchurch unity and formed the Evangelical Alliance.²⁸ Its motto was, "Unum Corpus Sumus in Christo" ("We are One Body in Christ").²⁹ A little over fifty years later, another opportunity for unity was presented.

²⁴ Victor Knowles, *Together in Christ: More than a Dream* (Joplin, MO: Leafwood Pub. 2006), 25.

²⁵ Knowles, 14-24.

²⁶ Knowles, 65-71.

²⁷ Knowles, 145-147.

²⁸ Ian Randall, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism and Unity: A Case Study of the Evangelical Alliance" (*Evangelical* 22, no.3 Autumn, 2004), 62.

²⁹ Randall, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism and Unity: A Case Study of the Evangelical Alliance," 62.

Pentecostalism arose out of Azusa Street in Los Angeles and William Seymour, the African American leader of the extensive movement, called for unity.³⁰ In the first issue of his periodical *Apostolic Faith*, he wrote that this movement stood for “Christian unity everywhere.”³¹ Pentecostalism attracted diverse groups of people who came together in unity over Christ and this outpouring of the Spirit.³² Instead of unity, though, many older churches viewed the revival and the movement with disdain and rejected Seymour’s call.³³ Often Pentecostals became marginalized³⁴ and eventually formed their own denominations and fellowships. These early starts toward unity mostly failed to make headway in bringing separated denominations together for very long, and these ideals fell out of favor.³⁵

In the 1940s a renewed effort towards church unity arose. In 1943 the National Association of Evangelicals or NAE was formed.³⁶ Diverse evangelical denominations joined the NAE including some of the often excluded Pentecostal denominations; the Assemblies of God and the Church of God (Cleveland, TN.)³⁷ Ironically, the NAE, created to bring about Christian unity among evangelicals was also partially established

³⁰ Allan H. Anderson, “Pentecostals, Healing and Ecumenism,” (*International Review of Mission* 93, no. 370-371 2004), 488.

³¹ Anderson, 488.

³² Anderson, 488-489.

³³ Anderson, 488-489.

³⁴ Anderson, 489.

³⁵ George Vandervelde, “Evangelicals at and beyond Harare: Convergent, Divergent or Parallel Ecumenism?” (*Exchange* 28, no. 2 1999), 98-99.

³⁶ Anderson, 489.

³⁷ Anderson, 489.

in opposition to the growing ecumenical movement and theological liberalism within established Protestant churches.³⁸ In the 1960s some members of the NAE even went as far as attacking The World Council of Churches as anti-Christian.³⁹ Many of these evangelical denominations have since greatly softened their views on this matter to pursue further interdenominational relationships.⁴⁰

The World Council of Churches (WCC) was formed in 1948.⁴¹ The term ecumenism, from the Greek “oikumene” meaning whole household or community of God, became their motto and also became associated with more “liberal” theology.⁴² Over time the WCC embraced groups incompatible with evangelicalism.⁴³ They also, according to John Armstrong, “began to embrace aspects of theological diversity that were not always faithful to Christ’s mission”⁴⁴ as understood by many evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Consequently, most evangelicals and Roman Catholics either left or never joined this movement.⁴⁵ Ideological social and political agendas, on both the evangelical and liberal Protestant side of the interchurch movement, often caused further

³⁸ Anderson, 489.

³⁹ Anderson, 489.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 492.

⁴¹ Raymond Pfister, “An Urgent Plea for a Real Ecumenism of the Spirit: Revisiting Evangelicalism and Ecumenism within Pentecostal-Charismatic Theological Education,” (*Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 29, no. 1 2009), 23-24.

⁴² Pfister, 23-24.

⁴³ Vandervelde, 98-99.

⁴⁴ John H. Armstrong, *Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ's Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 103.

⁴⁵ Armstrong, 103.

divisions.⁴⁶ Due to this, relational oneness in the missional context of Christ and His people was often made secondary.⁴⁷

Not long after these things took shape an evangelist came to the forefront of American evangelical Christianity. Billy Graham was more inclusive in his approach than other evangelicals.⁴⁸ He believed that it was possible to be a strong evangelical Christian while understanding that the church was much bigger than just the evangelical church.⁴⁹ It was out of these beliefs that another phenomenon began and eventually a group was formed called Evangelicals and Catholics Together.⁵⁰ The idea originated as something of a cultural “co-belligerency”; according to Vandervelde it “reached beyond cooperative action to probe common theological and missiological ground.”⁵¹ The group proved to be controversial among evangelicals and yet brought to light a need for better relationships between orthodox Christian traditions.⁵²

Unity in Denominations and Associations

Ultimately Jesus came to build a church, not an assortment of churches.⁵³ There were and are no denominations in the New Testament. In fact the authors of the New

⁴⁶ Armstrong, 104.

⁴⁷ Armstrong, 104.

⁴⁸ Ian Randall, “Outgrowing Combative Boundary-Setting: Billy Graham, Evangelism and Fundamentalism,” (*Evangelical Review of Theology* 34, no. 2 2010), 117-118.

⁴⁹ Randall, “Outgrowing Combative Boundary-Setting: Billy Graham, Evangelism and Fundamentalism,” 117-118.

⁵⁰ Vandervelde, 101.

⁵¹ Vandervelde, 101.

⁵² Vandervelde, 101.

⁵³ John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the One Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 26.

Testament rebuke autonomy and factions and emphasize harmony in the church.⁵⁴ Today the church is divided. As a result, there are no consistent moral or doctrinal standards among denominations, and membership means very little in most cases.⁵⁵ Often there is competition between denominational bodies, making reconciliation difficult and distorting godly priorities.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, there is also much hope.

The Bible instructs the church to strive toward unity and challenges the church to greater obedience and faith.⁵⁷ This pursuit is foundational to the hope for cooperation. Likewise, when other religions and ideologies push against the church, Christian unity arises out of a “common distress.”⁵⁸ The modern church is being pressed from many directions including non-Christian ideologies making it an opportune time to find strength in the greater body of Christ. As well, the church cannot ignore the witness of Christ to the unbeliever.⁵⁹ The question is, “Where does the church begin to find unity and how?”

For many the starting place of unity is the Apostles Creed. The creed is an early statement of Christian faith which affirms the essential Christian beliefs.⁶⁰ Others have suggested an evangelical COCU or Church of Christ Uniting which would entail a large group of denominations covenanting to work, pray, and study together for as long as

⁵⁴ Frame, 27-28.

⁵⁵ Frame, 47-51.

⁵⁶ Frame, 47-51, 54.

⁵⁷ Roger Mehl, *The Sociology of Protestantism*, Translated by James H. Farley. trans. ed. (Norwich, UK: SCM Press, 1970), 191.

⁵⁸ Mehl, 195.

⁵⁹ Mehl, 201.

⁶⁰ Armstrong, 79.

possible to bring about a reunion.⁶¹ The first steps would be gathering similar groups of evangelical churches together, uniting them, and then moving onto more theologically diverse groups.⁶² The first challenge which must be faced is determining the central theological tenets in which complete agreement is required, and what tenets are of less importance. Many scholars including Esther Bruland have written that individual churches and denominations need not divide over “adiaphora” or “things indifferent.”⁶³ This is the belief that there is Christian liberty in matters that are not strictly prohibited in the Bible.⁶⁴ Hence differences over these matters should not divide the church.⁶⁵ Likewise, misguided loyalty to these issues at the expense of unity is “sacrilege against the church, the body of Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶ Since there is not absolute agreement over what these issues are (though a vast majority could at least agree on some list) self-examination by individual traditions is necessary, as well as accepting the gifts and liabilities of differing Christian traditions.⁶⁷ All of this requires a call to prayer and personal interchurch/interdenominational relationships.

Where merger is impossible close fellowship should be pursued, especially in parachurch ministries.⁶⁸ One of the strengths of the NAE is how it pulls evangelicals into

⁶¹ Frame, 132.

⁶² Frame, 140.

⁶³ Esther Byle Bruland, *Regathering The Church from “They” to “We”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 31.

⁶⁴ Bruland, 31.

⁶⁵ Bruland, 32.

⁶⁶ Bruland, 40.

⁶⁷ Bruland, 74-75.

⁶⁸ Frame, 156-157.

new networks and parachurch alliances.⁶⁹ Evangelical denominations can and should support mutually beneficial, Christ-centered missionaries, social and relief organizations, publishers, colleges, seminaries, and other various groups.⁷⁰ They may not have nor desire the finer theological distinctives yet these groups do well at evangelizing the world.⁷¹ This kind of unity is “grassroots ecumenism,” which is binding diverse Christians together who hold similar beliefs.⁷² In these kinds of parachurch ministries, denominations can begin to no longer see other groups as rivals but see each other’s commonalities.⁷³

The ultimate task of the church is to proclaim Christ, and this duty compels the greater body to seek unity.⁷⁴ Karl Barth writes, “The quest for unity of the Church must in fact be identical with the quest for Jesus Christ as the concrete head of the Church.”⁷⁵ He believed that the church has no right to defend a “multiplicity of churches” because the whole idea is foreign to the New Testament.⁷⁶ Thus if Christ truly is the head of the church, then denominations have a mandate to find union together in Christ.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 221.

⁷⁰ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 223-224.

⁷¹ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 223-224.

⁷² Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 223-224.

⁷³ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 227.

⁷⁴ Barth, 10.

⁷⁵ Barth, 13.

⁷⁶ Barth, 19.

⁷⁷ Barth, 33.

Church to Church

What is discussed and agreed upon between denominations and their leaders on the higher levels may trickle down to the local neighborhood church or parish. However, if the neighborhood church or parish chooses to be uncooperative with either its denominational oversight or its neighbor of a different Christian denomination it is all for naught. Polity should be considered since some denominations have no binding control over their respective churches, which may be self-governing and autonomous. These churches may be connected, but depending upon their polity and how leadership is distributed they may go their own way. Then there are also declared independent churches to be considered as well. How will they respond to the call for unity?

Councils, agreements, and meetings between denominational officials can be beneficial and produce positive change. However, the most dynamic and essential place to begin to participate in interchurch dialogue, fellowship, evangelism, and relationships is the local church. To begin this requires at least two individual churches willing to engage. Two questions must then be explored: how does interchurch community development and outreach commence, and when it does what form should it take in a local community?

Simplistic as it may sound, Cecil Robeck, Jr. who has studied and written on denominational relationships extensively writes that the place to begin building interchurch relationships is praying for one another, building real friendships between pastors, and getting on the same page about basic global needs.⁷⁸ The challenge is the

⁷⁸ Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Pentecostal Ecumenism: Overcoming the Challenges--Reaping the Rewards: Understanding the Nature of Ecumenism (Part 2)," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 35, no. 1 (2015), 9,12-13.

extensive obstacles, certain ingrained barriers that must be recognized, confronted, and overcome to bring about unity.

Obstacles to unity at a local church level are typically either cultural and sociological or sinful. The first is fairly straightforward; many people have trouble accepting and adjusting to different kinds of people.⁷⁹ People of different races, classes, life experiences,⁸⁰ and educational backgrounds⁸¹ can prove to be challenging to one's person whether one would admit it or try use the pretense that these divisions are theological.⁸² Yet the people of Christ are a new body⁸³ and what is now primary is Christ. As hard as it might be, these tensions must be overcome. When recognized for what they are they can be overcome.

The second barrier, sin, is often more difficult. There is a litany of wrong and sinful attitudes that cause division between local churches. John Frame mentions many of them in his work *Evangelical Reunion*; the notable ones include pride, jealousy, harshness, snobbery, ambition, arrogance,⁸⁴ and so on. Likewise, the assumption that one can learn nothing outside of one's own tradition⁸⁵ is ignorance, if not sinfulness. Other writers put a more positive spin on overcoming these obstacles and write of what can be

⁷⁹ Paul A. Crow, Jr., *Christian Unity: Matrix for Mission*, (New York: Friendship Press, 1982), 22.

⁸⁰ Crow, 22.

⁸¹ Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., "Pentecostal Ecumenism: Overcoming the Challenges--Reaping the Rewards: Understanding the Nature of Ecumenism (Part 1)," (*Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 34, no. 2 2014), 128-129.

⁸² Crow, 22.

⁸³ Robeck, "Pentecostal ecumenism: overcoming the challenges--reaping the rewards: understanding the nature of ecumenism (Part 1)." 116.

⁸⁴ Frame, 124-127.

⁸⁵ Frame, 129.

done to avoid sinful barriers to unity. Christopher Morgan uses Ephesians 4, a text dealing with unity, as a basis to write a positive list. He includes on his list: valuing and being gentle with others, patience, putting up with quirks, promoting peace and unity over self, truth over manipulation, refusing anger, refusing to speak negatively about the church or other churches, putting away bitterness, and embracing kindness and forgiveness.⁸⁶

Perhaps the largest sinful barrier to unity is fear. Fear is also a most challenging sinful but also psychological barrier to unity.⁸⁷ Fear of Christian unity is essentially a lack of faith in God's will for the church to be unified, that somehow unity will cause more problems than good.⁸⁸ There is fear of losing traditions, fear of change, fear that a pastor or church will be forced to do or accept things they do not want to accept.⁸⁹ Faith is necessary. The church needs faith enough to trust God and accept real Christian love and reconciliation for what it is and not what one can imagine it might be.⁹⁰

Much can be found within humanity over which to divide. Instead the church should find itself in unity over the one thing that unites it, Christ. Whatever must take place, be overcome, or rejected to find unity in Christ, His Gospel, and mission to the world, should be embraced. Interchurch unity must be based in the understanding that other churches which preach and teach the Gospel are part of God's Kingdom as well.

⁸⁶ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 34-35

⁸⁷ Crow, 21.

⁸⁸ Crow, 21-22.

⁸⁹ Crow, 21-22.

⁹⁰ Crow, 21-22.

Together an interchurch community can strengthen itself for the benefit of the Kingdom of God and moreover for those who lack faith in Christ. As Paul Crow states, “Whenever the church accepts the fact that it is living in a missionary situation, the call to unity becomes vital.”⁹¹ The church in northern New England is presently in a missionary situation, which corresponds with Crow’s statement.

The more the church is divided, the more the testimony presented by the church is confused and ineffective.⁹² For unity among believers is a demonstration of our relationship to God.⁹³ Unity is a vital outward display of God’s love, and this unity becomes a testimony to the world at the local level.⁹⁴ Biblical oneness should be at work in the local body and demonstrating spiritual oneness with other believers should be evident to all.⁹⁵ Individual believers and church bodies should be committed to work through problems rather than divide.⁹⁶ They should be committed to loving each other⁹⁷ and making the Kingdom of God central.⁹⁸ Accordingly, prayer for unity is vital: the amount of concern for unity can be measured in the degree in which one prays for it.⁹⁹ To

⁹¹ Crow, 43.

⁹² Ed Dobson, *In Search of Unity: An Appeal to Fundamentalists and Evangelicals* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985), 21.

⁹³ Dobson, 21.

⁹⁴ Dobson, 21.

⁹⁵ Armstrong, 60.

⁹⁶ Armstrong, 164.

⁹⁷ Armstrong, 164.

⁹⁸ Armstrong, 196.

⁹⁹ Crow, 79.

pray together is to be drawn together.¹⁰⁰ Without such an emphasis and reliance upon God, the sociological and sinful matters that can easily divide a church or interchurch community become prevalent.

Unity is proven to be necessary and good for local churches and missions around the world. In the church throughout the world, unity among evangelical bodies and missionaries is an effective way to galvanize the church, reach the lost, and effect positive change in society. In the small European nation of Albania, evangelical missionaries have found unity across diverse denominational lines.¹⁰¹ Albanian missions have been strengthened by a vision of cooperation. This has been accomplished by promoting each other's group events and outreaches across denominational lines, as well as dealing with the government as a collective.¹⁰² The individual groups have understood that interdependence not independence from one another has kept the church as a whole from failing.¹⁰³

The same is true on the other side of the world for the evangelical church in the Philippines. In the Philippines, loose evangelical church associations have been critically important in evangelizing this island nation. There, like in Albania or anywhere else, local interchurch relationships have proven to be beneficial to the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁴ Hence what makes up a healthy interchurch fellowship is mutual support. If prayer is the

¹⁰⁰ Crow, 79.

¹⁰¹ Linford Stutzman, "To Win the Hearts and Minds: Evangelical Mission Activity..." (*Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 33, no. 1 Winter, 1996), 55-56.

¹⁰² Stutzman, 55-56.

¹⁰³ Stutzman, 55-56.

¹⁰⁴ Franklin W. Allen, "The Association of Bible Churches of the Philippines: A History and Model of Relationships," (D.Miss. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1984) 5-6.

start of interchurch unity, it must lead to pastors and churches bearing each other's burdens,¹⁰⁵ meeting together cooperatively,¹⁰⁶ and developing true personal relationships.¹⁰⁷ Yet these things cannot always be rushed, for maturing in the unity of Christ often takes time.¹⁰⁸

Starting off small may be the best place to begin. A church can begin to do obvious and simple things on its own to promote interchurch unity. Prayer and the simple olive branch of calling and introducing oneself to the local ministers can be a meaningful step.¹⁰⁹ Being self-critical gives a pastor and church body the mindset to become less dismissive of what other traditions have to say.¹¹⁰ Likewise local bodies need to follow Christ's example of practicing forgiveness for any past difficulties between local churches and finding ways to serve each other with no expectation of a reward.¹¹¹

Ultimately what can be done in a local interchurch community are the same things a local singular church can do; the only limitations are those that the individual churches place upon themselves. The best interchurch cooperation is one naturally flowing from Christ-centered love within the community.¹¹² Once two churches begin to aid each other

¹⁰⁵ Robert E. Coleman, "The Fellowship of the Church in the Book of Acts," (*Evangelical Review of Theology* 12, no. 1 1988), 20.

¹⁰⁶ Coleman, 21.

¹⁰⁷ Coleman, 23.

¹⁰⁸ Coleman, 28.

¹⁰⁹ Frame, 165-169.

¹¹⁰ Frame, 165-169.

¹¹¹ Frame, 165-169.

¹¹² Vera Duncanson, Brian Johnson, and Stefanie Weisgram, eds., *Stories from Christian Neighbors a Heart for Ecumenism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 7-8.

in things such as food and clothing distribution, joint choirs, joint vacation Bible schools, joint community events, and joint support at funerals, real Christian unity can be embraced and experienced.¹¹³ Many of these things can take place outside the church building to alleviate territorial pressures.¹¹⁴ Interdenominational home Bible studies are wonderful ways of fellowshipping once trust has been established.¹¹⁵ Joint times of standing and taking action together for truth on basic Christian issues can develop.¹¹⁶

In modern history, there has been a focus and exploration of New Testament norms, such as the charismatic gifts, the partaking of communion, church cooperation, among other items. Many in the church have emphasized that these New Testament norms of unity and cooperation should be followed both as a command and example of faith in Jesus Christ. Efforts have been made in the past one hundred plus years and, at times, these efforts have fallen short or have attempted unity at the expense of the Gospel. Either way, the efforts have almost always been met with challenges and detractors. The most important thing though is that local church bodies unify around Christ and biblical principles, and to seek unity among the greater body of Christ in whatever ways are appropriate. All of this should be done in an effort to bring glory to God.

The Limits of Interchurch Cooperation

Interchurch cooperation, leading to the development of unified outreach and community development within local church bodies should be a goal of every evangelical

¹¹³ Duncanson, Johnson, and Weisgram, eds., 7-8.

¹¹⁴ Frame, 75.

¹¹⁵ Frame, 75.

¹¹⁶ Frame, 165-169.

church. However, it would be a mistake to affirm interchurch cooperation as limitless. Narrowly, each church and church community has for better or worse its own traditional limitations and mores. More broadly there are two limitations that should effect evangelical interchurch unity, politics and unorthodox theology and practice.

In every election year, interest in politics has the potential of making its way into the church. Some clergy embrace this and litter their pulpits with the political discussion of the day in varied attempts to wed their political positions to Scripture. The biblical authors wrote about many issues that can lead to crucial understandings of politics in modern times. Certainly many Christians have valued and valid political leanings garnered from Scripture. There are times that issues of the day are both intrinsically moral and political, and those subjects should be examined in and by the church, but this is not limitless. As well, the kind of unity found around a political cause, candidate, or party should not be the only major factor around interchurch unity.

There are ultimately two dangers to this, the first being disqualification of valid fellowship and the second being qualification for invalid fellowship. Both are due to politics. The best example of modern evangelical political overreach can be found in the United States, especially in presidential election years. Neil Young in his book *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* does a rather thorough study on the “Religious Right.” He speaks to both these dangers and cites times when some evangelical leaders and groups, “seemed to blur the lines between the evangelical and LDS faiths.”¹¹⁷ Essentially, Mormons and evangelicals share many political beliefs, yet at times core and conflicting theology from both groups was

¹¹⁷ Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 257.

overlooked for the sake of politics.¹¹⁸ Certainly there are values that these two groups have in common, and they may work toward common goals together. However, whatever these values and goals are the church should not conceal the theological differences as has been done. In those cases unity was found at the expense of the Gospel.

The opposite problem, which is the disqualification of valid evangelical fellowship, also stems from the church becoming overly and overtly political. Politics within the church had been a growing issue for evangelicals, which during the 1970s and 80s turned out to be embarrassing at times.¹¹⁹ Many evangelical groups under the National Association of Evangelicals unified their message to embrace political candidates who turned out to be problematic.¹²⁰ Politicians do not always live up to the “Christian family values” they profess. Embarrassments like extra-marital affairs, inappropriate speech and behavior, and drastic changes in direction on key social issues have hurt both the politicians and church leaders who have endorsed them. Embarrassments aside, the NAE and many of its members have endorsed numerous popular political positions. In 1986 Rev. Brian Stiller, a director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada or EFC (broadly the Canadian counterpart to the American NAE,) warned against this.¹²¹ He warned that these popular cultural issues held very dearly by American evangelicals could very well hinder evangelical cooperation and evangelism.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Young, 254-260.

¹¹⁹ John Gordon Stackhouse, “The National Association of Evangelicals, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, and the Limits of Evangelical Cooperation,” (*Christian Scholar's Review* 25, no. 2 1995), 165-166.

¹²⁰ Stackhouse, 165-166.

¹²¹ Stackhouse, 167-169.

¹²² Stackhouse, 167-169.

Yet, the NAE continued to take stands on issues such as defense and free-market economics.¹²³ As an unintended side effect, these stands alienated many evangelical fellowships and denominations, especially those in the Anabaptist tradition.¹²⁴ So in the NAE's desire to find interdenominational unity over political issues, they often became overly exclusionary.¹²⁵ Here unbiblical disunity was created so that certain political positions could be upheld. Thus evangelical churches and organizations should be careful and even limit themselves as they explore the realm of politics.

The second limitation for unity, unorthodox theology and practice is a complex and layered discussion. It verges into the realms of ethics, denominational hierarchy, biblical hermeneutics, and their application. Some of these issues will only be dealt with briefly. However, even before one can delve into this complex issue, one must also affirm that differing doctrinal positions can cause wrong and unhelpful moral practice. Theologians influenced by post-modern thought deny this. For example theologian Robert Jenson denies that there are denominational distinctions on issues as important as justification,¹²⁶ and this should be rejected. In his view, valid disagreements over denominational positions are no more than emotionalism.¹²⁷ This is illogical and at best a denial of the tension.

¹²³ Stackhouse, 174-175.

¹²⁴ Stackhouse, 174-175.

¹²⁵ Stackhouse, 174-175.

¹²⁶ Robert W. Jenson, *Unbaptized God: The Basic Flaw in Ecumenical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 4-5, 19-20.

¹²⁷ Jenson, 21.

Unorthodox theology and practice comes in many shades. Churches follow or do not follow the basic doctrines and practices established by Scripture. These doctrines and practices are affirmed and systemized by the early church in creeds. Though it would be inaccurate to say evangelical Christianity is the sole practitioner of orthodoxy; it is because of the scope of this project that the discussion will focus on Protestantism. It is also within Protestantism where the greatest challenges to orthodoxy have occurred. Randall Balmer and Lauren Winner note in their book, *Protestantism in America*, “The notion of a personal conversion—being ‘saved’ or ‘born again’ —(was) once unremarkable among Protestants, but (presently) the liberal wing of Protestantism has gravitated away from such notions.”¹²⁸ This is not to say that simply terminology has been changed, but to state that many core beliefs and doctrines have been disregarded or set aside. The mainline Protestant church and the evangelical Protestant church are now doctrinally two very different entities. Balmer goes on to write, “The divide between the two ends of the spectrum sometimes make it appear that evangelical Protestants have more in common with, say, conservative Catholics than they do with liberal Protestants, who are more akin to Unitarians or Reformed Jews.”¹²⁹ There has been necessary division between evangelicals and many (though not all) mainline Protestants because they no longer hold in common much if any shared core beliefs surrounding the Gospel.

The mainline church is in the midst of a civil conflict of sorts within itself. Changes stemming from doctrines to regular church social practices have created a

¹²⁸ Randall Herbert Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, *Protestantism in America*, The Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5.

¹²⁹ Balmer and Winner, 5.

“fissure” in the mainline church.¹³⁰ Agreement even over how to approach Scripture and scriptural intent cannot be agreed upon within many denominational churches.¹³¹ Not only do unorthodox doctrine and practice give pause to unity, but also the uncertainty of where denominations and their individual churches stand on most basic issues like the resurrection can create further confusion and distrust. Most evangelical churches recognize that the LDS church is unorthodox. Therefore, unity between evangelicals and Mormons is limited. However, the doctrine and practices of many mainline churches like the United Methodist Church are almost unknowable due to internal divisions.¹³² Consequently when major aspects of the Gospel are no longer affirmed or can be agreed upon, unity over Christ and His Gospel is moot.

Both politics and unorthodox theology often impede unity in the church of Christ. Whatever aspects of commonality can be found, without the Gospel intact, there is no church. There may be a group that meets together apart from the Gospel and calls itself a church, but that is not a church established by Christ. Ecumenism basically fits into that category. It offers unity despite disagreement over important and foundational doctrine. In that case unity fails, for it is outside of Christ. As for the other extreme, to try to find interchurch unity on less important matters (matters outside of the faith) misses the point of the church. Logically the church is limited in its how it can cooperate in these realms.

¹³⁰ Balmer and Winner, 170-171.

¹³¹ Balmer and Winner, 150-154.

¹³² Sam Hodges and Beth DiCocco, “New England Conference Passes Act of Non-Conformity.” *umc.org/news-and-media/new-england-conference-passes-act-of-non-conformity*, (accessed August 27, 2016).

The Religious Setting and History of Northern New England

To understand the modern day challenges of interchurch communities in northern New England, the history of the religious setting must first be understood. The small size and independent mind of northern New England churches goes back to the late 1700s to early 1800s when the vast wilderness of the northern woods was originally settled.¹³³ Much of this area was settled by unorthodox religious dissenters, who flooded into northern New England just after the American Revolution.¹³⁴ There were some communities already established but these dissenters added to the chaotic mix in an already turbulent social, economic, and religious environment.¹³⁵ From these early days, churches in northern New England were marked by instability, contentious interchurch relationships, and doctrinal divisions that have been woven into the framework of the larger social and economic instability of the region.¹³⁶

From the start, the church in northern New England was a mixed group of those who did not belong to a congregation or religion.¹³⁷ Primarily Universalists, and often less than orthodox Christians, Baptist, Methodist, and Congregationalist were the established groups in northern New England.¹³⁸ By the early 1800s, Christians in Vermont were considered the most religiously liberal of any state often because they

¹³³ Shelby M. Balik, *Rally the Scattered Believers: Northern New England's Religious Geography*, Edited by Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2014), 45.

¹³⁴ Balik, 45.

¹³⁵ Balik, 1, 7-8, 36.

¹³⁶ Balik, 36.

¹³⁷ Balik, 1, 7-8.

¹³⁸ Balik, 1, 7-8.

sought religious consensus over orthodoxy.¹³⁹ Ironically, it was in northern New England that neither orthodoxy nor consensus was found, due to the disorderly nature of the churches.¹⁴⁰ Division was common. It was also quite common to have consecutive church splits within a single town in a short period of time, especially among Baptist churches.¹⁴¹ In turn this would often devastate local parish finances.¹⁴²

To create more stability despite these divisions, churches were often directly connected with town government.¹⁴³ By the year 1800, churches frequently met in town government buildings.¹⁴⁴ Instead of creating stability and unity however, unique traditions created further problems. For example, at that time, church members purchased pews which would then be reserved for their families.¹⁴⁵ If that family moved away or infrequently attended, those pews would sit empty at the expense of those who attended or who would have liked to attend, but could not afford their own pews.¹⁴⁶ Adding to the situation was the frequent migration from one town to another, resulting in rapid turnover in attenders but not in pew ownership.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, pew ownership was a sign of

¹³⁹ Balik, 78.

¹⁴⁰ Balik, 14, 16-17.

¹⁴¹ Balik, 41.

¹⁴² Balik, 41.

¹⁴³ Balik, 14, 16-17.

¹⁴⁴ Balik, 20.

¹⁴⁵ Balik, 24.

¹⁴⁶ Balik, 24.

¹⁴⁷ Balik, 24, 28.

social standing, and it created division between classes within the church.¹⁴⁸ Often all this was under the auspices of a government facility the church was borrowing on Sunday.¹⁴⁹

All of these factors created more division and tension in the northern New England church. Additionally, migration had another side effect. It created a common situation, especially among Baptist churches, where many churches had no local established pastor, and thus there was little enforcement of biblical order and doctrine.¹⁵⁰ This is the broad unstable foundation for the church in northern New England, a region plagued by religious infighting and disorder.

In more modern times, the challenges are not so different in New England. From the 1960s onward, these elements of migration and sociological differences have hampered many traditional churches from growing and ministering.¹⁵¹ Research in the 1990s also showed that the church in New England was struggling against its unique social and religious surrounding culture.¹⁵² A survey found that New Englanders have different religious attitudes from much of the rest of the United States. New Englanders have a more secular mindset; they value self-reliance; they are resistant to change; they tend to be more reserved than average Americans, making the ministry of the local

¹⁴⁸ Balik, 24.

¹⁴⁹ Balik, 24.

¹⁵⁰ Balik, 28, 51.

¹⁵¹ Stephen P. Vannah, "Analysis of a Small New England Church for Church Renewal" (D.Min. diss., Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, 2005), 4.

¹⁵² Phillip G. Andrade, "Developing Leaders in a New England Small Church Context: Returning the Task of Leadership Development to the Local Church" (D.Min. diss., Bethel Theological Seminary, 2010), 1.

church more difficult.¹⁵³ These prevalent attitudes would then affect and seep into the local church.

The church in northern New England is plagued by spiritual stagnancy as well as a need for spiritual renewal. The statistics from recent surveys in northern New England are challenging to the evangelical church. The statistics in chapter one reveal a threefold challenge: an obvious disintegration of church communities, the increasing number of people who have no religious affiliation, and the relatively small number of both evangelical Christians and church attenders as compared to the rest of the country.

The historic background and modern religious setting of northern New England is important to the pursuit of interchurch outreach and cooperation. The first and most obvious reason is the fact that division and divisiveness among the body of Christ has been shown to only perpetuate the already present disorder, unorthodoxy, and faithlessness within northern New England. The second is that the social setting of New England describes most people as indifferent to the church. Finally, that migration has often been a factor that has hindered church stability and growth. None of these factors are especially helpful to interchurch cooperation among small evangelical churches.

Evangelical interchurch cooperation in northern New England is necessary for the Kingdom of God in this region to be what it was intended to become. The history of northern New England, and New England itself, plays a vital role in how this unfolds. Culture and history cannot be simply tossed aside but must be considered and contemplated in all the church does. Interchurch unity, outreach, and community

¹⁵³ New England Research Project, "What Are the Unique Traits of New Englanders? A Preliminary Study of New England Culture" (A Strategic Partnership of Vision New England and the Ockenga Institute of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1997)

development are biblical norms that have been explored by numerous scholars and denominations. Realistically these norms must find shape and manifestation in local interchurch communities to become effective. Limits must always be considered, for unity around the Gospel does mean exclusion to those groups who do not hold to the orthodox Christian faith. Nevertheless, unity amongst those who are of like faith in Christ should be embraced.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODS

Data and Methodology

Nature of the Research

The evangelical church in northern New England has rarely been a unified body of believers. Disunity over lesser issues has often separated churches with the same basic beliefs about the Gospel and Jesus Christ. This is the reason for and the main bias of the researcher's argument. This project has examined the need for solutions to this problem of disunity. Through this project the researcher has sought to discover why there is considerable disunity, and how to rectify this in a biblical way. The preferred outcome of the research would be a plan to bring about interchurch cooperation in the areas of outreach and interchurch community development.

The research began with a review of Scripture, with the intent of discovering what normative, biblical, interchurch cooperation and outreach should be. Following this biblical and theological research the focus shifted to a review of relevant literature corresponding to interdenominational cooperation and outreach. The results of this research formed two data streams. To provide a more complete understanding of interchurch cooperation, the researcher designed and completed qualitative field research. Paul Leedy writes about the qualitative approach:

To answer some research questions, we cannot skim across the surface. We must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying. In qualitative research, we do indeed dig deep: We collect numerous forms of data

and examine them from various angles to construct a rich and meaningful picture of a complex, multifaceted situation.¹

The researcher chose to examine the need for interchurch unity and cooperation among evangelical churches, by undertaking a qualitative study because this kind of approach is a more accurate way to achieve a greater understanding of interchurch relationships. In order to study something qualitatively the researcher must collect data “in a natural setting,” then subsequently analyze the data to discover its “patterns or themes,”² according to John Creswell.

The researcher chose to conduct multiple case studies to examine a broad range of interchurch communities. It was crucially important to gather information from multiple sources and multiple sites in northern New England. Otherwise the research would have led to a narrower, and possibly an inaccurate representation of interchurch cooperation in the prescribed area. By doing so, necessary data was gathered, coded, and analyzed to discover why church communities do or do not cooperate in outreach and interchurch community development. The case study method is advantageous for these procedures as Robert Yin writes, “In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over the events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.”³ Likewise, he stated that, “the case study is preferred in examining contemporary events.”⁴

¹ Paul Leedy and Jeane Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005), 133.

² John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 37.

³ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Applied Social Research Methods) 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications: 2003), 1.

⁴ Yin, 7.

In the case studies themselves, John Creswell recommends the use of suitable methods of data collection including “observations” and “interviews.”⁵ Thus the primary tools used in this multiple case study were; personal interviews (considered by Yin to be a most important source of information),⁶ questionnaires, documents, and observational field notes. Then appropriate methods of analysis were completed including “categorization and interpretation of data in terms of common themes,” and “synthesis into an overall portrait of the case(s).”⁷

There are some “traditional prejudices against the case study strategy.”⁸ Yin points out a few including a, “lack of rigor, *because* biased views may influence the direction of the case study,” or that they “provide little basis for scientific generalization.”⁹ To answer this need, the researcher would require multiple experiments or multiple case studies.¹⁰ This is why the research was done not at one site, but three different sites. Multiple case studies show different perspectives on an issue.¹¹ Another “prejudice” against case studies are that they simply take too long and are in themselves, often long and unreadable.¹² This potential issue was addressed by limiting the time of the research to less than six months in 2016. Likewise, the increasing the scope of the

⁵ Creswell, 144.

⁶ Yin, 89.

⁷ Creswell, 144.

⁸ Yin, 10.

⁹ Yin, 10.

¹⁰ Yin, 10.

¹¹ Creswell, 74.

¹² Yin, 11.

project to include three case study sites instead of one, decreased the potential for any miscalculations.

The validity of the research and the findings are important as well. The internal validity of the project was particularly important. Leedy writes that to have internal validity, accurate conclusions about cause and effect must be drawn from the data.¹³

Multiple sources can help assure that the conclusions from the data are correct.

Furthermore, triangulation which Leedy defines as when, “multiple sources of data are collected with the hope that they will all converge to support a particular hypothesis or theory,”¹⁴ was implemented. With this project, the three streams of data used in triangulation were: the biblical/theological study, the literature study, and the multiple case studies, as recommended by Yin¹⁵ and Creswell.¹⁶ As well, pattern matching and coding data helped bring internal validity.¹⁷ The external validity of the project was also considered. Leedy states that the measure of external validity is attained by, “the extent to which the conclusions drawn can be *generalized* to other contexts.”¹⁸ This was addressed by gathering data from real life settings and getting a representative sample from each.¹⁹ This was done by choosing sites in different areas of northern New England and gathering data from as many evangelical pastors as possible.

¹³ Leedy and Ormrod, 97.

¹⁴ Leedy and Ormrod, 99.

¹⁵ Yin, 97.

¹⁶ Creswell, 38.

¹⁷ Yin, 116.

¹⁸ Leedy and Ormrod, 99.

¹⁹ Leedy and Ormrod, 99.

Case Studies

The three sites selected in this multiple case study were chosen for a variety of reasons. The first and most important reason was that each community site fit the parameters stipulated in this project. Each site was located in one of the three states that make up northern New England and contained multiple small evangelical churches.

The first site chosen and referred to as “the Maine site” (though one of the ministers included in the Maine site serves a church just over the border in New Hampshire) was centered on Route 25 and the Ossipee River. It was a multiple town hub that included the small towns of Parsonsfield, Porter, Cornish, Hiram, and Limerick in Maine as well as parts of Freedom and Effingham in New Hampshire. This region was often referred to unofficially as the “Ossipee Valley” or the “Sacoee Valley.” The Maine site was chosen because Parsonsfield was more or less the geographical center of this area where the researcher was a minister.

It was also chosen because it is an example of interchurch unity being attempted with some success, yet challenged by some complex hindrances. These difficulties included a decreasing number of churches, smaller church congregations, and a firm belief in the status quo by many in the church communities. There were attempts made and some success in churches cooperating. However these three factors sometimes mired the interchurch unity at the Maine site.

The second site chosen and referred to as “the New Hampshire site” was centered in Berlin, New Hampshire, the largest city in the “North Woods.” The geographic area was also located along Route. 16 and the Androscoggin River. This area included the municipalities of Gorham, Berlin, Milan, and Dummer in New Hampshire. The New

Hampshire site was chosen because of the researcher's family ties (his wife and her family were from this area) and his familiarity with the area churches. The researcher had visited several of these churches prior to this project and was on friendly terms with two of the local ministers. The New Hampshire site also acted as an example of where interchurch unity had been well established and flourishing for a decade.

The third site chosen and referred to as "the Vermont site" took a few months to choose. In determining what area to investigate, a process of elimination was used. Since Maine and New Hampshire both had sites, a Vermont site was not necessary but preferred. Three other Maine sites were examined but quickly eliminated for various reasons, mostly due to a lack of cooperation from their respective local churches. Only one local minister from these other possible sites responded to the researcher.

In examining Vermont for an appropriate site, large urban areas with populations over 20,000 and towns within a 10 mile radius of cities with populations over 20,000 were eliminated. The next step in choosing a site was to narrow down the possibilities to municipalities with a church associated with the researcher's fellowship—the Assemblies of God. This was both to give a starting point to contact and investigate the possibility of cooperation in this project and to gain assistance in contacting other churches in their community. Ministers are sometimes more willing to cooperate with a familiar face.

A total of fourteen communities were identified which fit the general model required and contained an Assemblies of God church. Of those fourteen churches, five Assemblies of God churches either lacked a pastor or had a recently elected a pastor who was not aware of his or her community in a significant or helpful way. Another five were unresponsive or did not have many evangelical churches in their community. With only

four communities left to explore, the Rutland area was finally chosen for several reasons. It has a very responsive Assemblies of God pastor and church. The minister was not only willing to work with the researcher in gathering data from the church he serves but was also willing to contact the relatively large number of evangelical churches and ministers in Rutland. In fact over a dozen were present in Rutland. Finally, the initial response from the six local ministers who agreed to cooperate with the researcher was quite positive. All three sites were chosen by August 2016.

The participants themselves were all chosen based upon their involvement with local evangelical churches in the three sites. For the clergy chosen, all active evangelical pastors were contacted in the three communities based on either listed public church phone numbers or the recommendation of previously contacted ministers. All lay people were contacted upon recommendation and permission of their pastors or were previously known to the researcher. An unavoidable research bias should be noted at this point. The sample of participants were likely individuals who were more interested in interchurch cooperation than the average evangelical minister or lay person in northern New England. By simply agreeing to contribute to this project, the participant was showing support for a minor cooperative effort between multiple churches. Those who are strongly or moderately against interchurch cooperation would likely never agree to participate. Therefore, the participant pool is unavoidably skewed since one cannot force another to contribute. The bias is that the participants are probably more positive toward and active in interchurch cooperation than others who may have taken part.

Table 4.1 shows a breakdown of the individuals contacted, their level of response from each site, and the breakdown of cold calls and responses from sites not chosen.

Table 4.1. The Level of Response from Each Site

	Disconnected numbers	No call backs	Initially agreed to participate but did not follow through	Followed through and participated
Maine site	2	0	0	9
New Hampshire site	0	0	0	8
Vermont site	2	6	4	4
Other possible sites	1	5	1	0

Table 4.2 shows the breakdown of those who participated by their general role in the church they serve.

Table 4.2. The Church Role of the Participants

	Clergy	Laity	Total
Maine site	6	3	9
New Hampshire site	5	3	8
Vermont site	3	1	4

Three methods were used to gather data from the three sites. The first method was in-person interviews, using a twelve question interview guide and questionnaire (Appendix A). During the interviews the researcher asked questions about the local interchurch activity and probed to understand the feelings of each contributor. The participants expressed their unique understandings of what evangelical interchurch unity and cooperation was at that time and should be in the future. Data from these interviews was gathered to further the researcher's understanding of interchurch unity. Each participant was required to sign an informed consent in order for their answers to be used in this project. The second method used when necessary, in place of the first, was an online version of the aforementioned questionnaire. An email was sent, including a brief explanation along with the online informed consent. The Interview/Questionnaire was utilized.

The interview questions were related to the topic of how churches in their respective communities worked together. All the participants were asked about the history of interchurch cooperation, the limits of cooperation, and the future and possible changes for these local churches working together. The idea of interchurch outreach was also investigated. In total twenty-one interviews and questionnaires were completed by the participants.

The final method used was not an instrument but in-person observation which included field notes taken by the researcher. These field notes were taken at interchurch events which were observed by or reported to the researcher through personal conversation and online reporting. These were used to gain interchurch data from each of the sites for this study. The data gathered by the observations of the researcher was then used to make recommendations in order to improve evangelical interchurch activity.

Multiple meetings were attended within the Maine site. Since the researcher has been a part of this interchurch community for years both pastoral breakfasts and nights of music experiences were drawn upon. During the specific time this project was being completed, ten meetings were attended.

Within the New Hampshire site two meetings were attended: a pastoral prayer meeting and a unity worship meeting. The prayer meeting was chosen because it was scheduled just as the researcher needed to attend interchurch meetings for this project. The unity worship meeting was attended when the researcher was visiting relatives in the area who had previously planned to attend this meeting. Due to a lack of an invitation and information from the local ministers, no meetings were attended at the Vermont site.

As to the process of coding and analyzing the data, multiple narrow themes were found in each case study, many of which overlapped. The researcher discovered these themes by color coding and diagramming the relevant data found in answers to the interview questions. These themes were then grouped into broad categories and further analyzed for each site. From that point, commonalities as well as differences were grouped together and scrutinized from all three sites. Finally, the conclusions drawn from these themes were used to address the final three subproblems. These subproblems were exploring and defining reasons why some small evangelical churches do not cooperate with each other, identifying and analyzing effective models and examples where interchurch cooperation works, and identifying what principles can and should be applied to small evangelical churches in northern New England to solve this inadequacy of interchurch cooperation. Each was resolved. Furthermore, there were no major changes from the overall original design of this project.

CHAPTER FIVE: CASE STUDIES RESEARCH

To better understand interchurch cooperation among evangelical churches in northern New England the researcher pursued three case studies of multiple churches at three interchurch sites. The three sites were chosen from each one of the three northern New England states to be regionally representative of the church community. Each site is unique and had different attitudes toward cooperation. Each location was pursuing joint evangelism and community development, and each had met with a different level of accomplishment. This was partially due to the different levels of effort put into this pursuit. Furthermore, philosophical and theological factors have played a large role in these efforts, as well as other factors such as fear on the researcher's part.

The Maine Site Case Study

The Maine site was evaluated differently from the other two sites since the researcher is a part of the Maine site but did not himself fill out a questionnaire. Due to this fact, there was a level of observation and interaction unlike the other sites that can both benefit and hinder the evaluation of the site. A balance of being a firsthand observer yet letting participants speak for themselves was attempted. The Maine site contained contributors who were conflicted about interchurch cooperation; however all generally seemed to want some level of fellowship among believers and joint Christian collaboration.

During the course of the investigation the researcher made some observations. The first was that the laity was more optimistic about church cooperation than the clergy.

Secondly, there was a mild tension when interchurch community took place. Thirdly, this tension has lessened as time passed. Interchurch cooperation had been a slow process. Finally there does seem to be mutual respect between churches and pastors.

The researcher in 2016 had attended interchurch worship services referred to as either “Singspiration” or “Nights of Music or Worship.” Also the researcher frequently attended a monthly pastor’s breakfast at a local restaurant. The atmosphere and culture exhibited at these meetings was ever-changing. When the researcher first arrived at the Maine site and was elected as the pastor of one of the local churches, many attempts at fellowship with area churches and ministers were rebuffed or ignored. Within the first year, the researcher was able to connect with a small, loosely affiliated group of evangelical or fundamentalist Baptist pastors.

When the researcher inquired about any interchurch fellowship or cooperation, the minister in contact with the researcher explained there was a monthly “Singspiration.” The minister made it clear that the researcher and the church he served would not be invited to join the group as equal members. Furthermore, they were welcome to attend but there were numerous limitations listed. For example, they were not allowed to host or lead the singing among other things. One of the main reasons for such limitations was that the researcher’s church was Pentecostal.

Soon after that conversation a pastor’s breakfast began, which the researcher was allowed to attend with a group of five other ministers who were involved in the joint worship. The pastor’s breakfast developed in three unique phases from 2010 to 2016. The first phase was an awkward attempt at being inoffensive. There was discomfort and several of the ministers would try to be very careful in what they would say. During this

period of time, all ideas for further unity and cooperation between the researcher and the other ministers were declined and even mildly rebuked. A second phase occurred about a year into these breakfast meetings. This phase was defined by a growing comfort level with the other ministers. This period of time also included more frank conversation and respectful disagreement.

The third phase of these breakfast meetings began in 2015. It was at this time two important events took place. The first was the retirement of the elder minister who had initially opposed the researcher's the church joining the "Singspiration." The second was that just before this retirement one of the other ministers approached the researcher about including his church in the "Singspiration." At this point, a level of respect for each minister was achieved. Although disagreement over a number of topics still existed (including the limits of cooperation), the atmosphere had changed and a new level of interchurch fellowship was achieved.

In 2015 six ministers and seven churches at the Maine site held joint worship services one evening each month. The atmosphere at first was awkward and quite rigid for some of the participants. There were specific rules in place to ensure that the joint worship stayed within the realm of a fundamentalist evangelical Baptist tradition. The lone Pentecostal church involved pledged to respect that tradition. For a year and a half, the researcher observed and participated in this joint worship. He saw the fellowship become more friendly and accepting. The researcher witnessed two of the five Baptist pastors become more accepting of what may be considered more Pentecostal traditions, specifically the raising of hands and clapping. This interchurch worship has also led several of the churches to begin to cooperatively participate in some small but significant

social justice ventures, such as distributing filled backpacks to needy children. The researcher believes the unified worship led to a slow and steady increase in other cooperative efforts among the participating churches.

Within the site five major themes were discovered. The first was a recognition of the benefits of unity. The second was anxiety and unease among the ministers about interchurch cooperation. The third was a desire for more unity around compassion ministries. The fourth was the division among ministers regarding limitations to church unity. The fifth and final major theme was the division over understanding of the role of evangelism in the church.

These themes were reached by reviewing each interview or questionnaire. Superfluous material was disregarded. From the twelve interview questions and observations, nineteen narrow themes were discovered. Many of these nineteen themes had commonalities, which were grouped into the five larger broader themes. Of these three, narrower themes overlapped into more than one category and therefore were analyzed under multiple broader themes.

The first major theme was that the vast majority of the participants recognized the benefits of interchurch unity. Most of the contributors saw at least some need for it, though there is some hesitation by the participants on how to implement cooperation. The one event most of the evangelical churches in the area took part in, the interchurch “Singspiration,” was universally praised by the contributors. Not one of them desired less

cooperation than what was occurring. MED¹ and MEE were the most cautious overall; and MED while not against it, seemed mostly indifferent to interchurch cooperation.

Some of the positive benefits to church unity listed by the contributors were “to create social stability,” to have “essential biblical” practice, and to show that the churches “share basic tenets of faith.” Most listed a benefit to those in the community by the churches collectively meeting social needs. Furthermore some said this was important because the “Lone Ranger” approach “doesn’t work.” By “Lone Ranger,” the participants indicated the desire of some churches and ministers to keep to themselves and exclude any other churches and ministers from interacting with them. It is interesting to note that though the “Singspiration” is the primary interchurch activity, it came up very little in actual conversation during the interviews. The only time it did come up was when the researcher specifically asked what was presently being done in the interchurch community and even then it was sometimes forgotten. More than half the contributors said interchurch unity was not excessive and that they would like it to be expanded. This would indicate that the benefits of unity were understood.

The second major theme discovered was anxiety and unease among the ministers about interchurch cooperation. This was, by far, the most prominent theme at the Maine site. There was a sense of fear expressed by a few of the ministers that they would offend the other clergy and churches if they sought to expand their interchurch relationships. One contributor felt any step in that direction could cause him to be ridiculed or excluded from the larger church group. MEB confessed a feeling of “walking on eggshells” around other ministers and pastoral “peer pressure.” In contrast, the laity interviewed and

¹ To protect the anonymity of the participants, each was given a specific three letter signifier when specifically referenced. The first two letters indicate the case study site which they serve by its state abbreviation, the third letter is an arbitrary letter to distinguish the contributors at the same site.

questioned were extremely interested in greater interchurch cooperation, even while many of their pastors were hesitant. However, MEB expressed that the congregation he serves would be unlikely to want more involvement. Two of the contributors confessed having fears that if more interchurch cooperation occurred, they would lose people to other churches. “Sheep-stealing” was mentioned more than a few times. This is the intentional luring of church attenders from one church to another. The apprehension many of the ministers expressed was based on fears of how interchurch activity would negatively impact themselves and the churches they served.

None of the contributors had concrete plans for furthering church unity and cooperation, for community development, or for evangelism. Two of the contributors expressed interest in the possibility of greater interchurch cooperation, including MEA who desired more fellowship between the men of the area. The women in some of the churches have done things together in the past as an unofficial interchurch group. The participants also complained of denominational interference hindering cooperation. Strangely, though, the vast majority of all the participants belonged to independent churches and may have been referring to this problem in theory. Also among the contributors there was simultaneous complaining about the other local church’s traditions and a desire to keep certain traditions of their own. Usually the objection would come up early in the interview. Some of the participants were critical of other churches that had many traditions which they indicated hindered cooperation. However, as the interviews progressed, the contributors would express that their traditions needed to be observed even at the expense of unity.

The third major theme was a desire for more unity around compassion ministries. Primarily, and with only one exception, there was widespread agreement that churches should, if possible, cooperate by meeting physical and social needs within the community. Compassion ministries such as food or clothing distribution were welcomed. A free backpack giveaway took place in 2015 and 2016. Four local churches as well as several businesses gathered backpacks and supplies to meet the needs of 80-100 local children before school began in the late summer. Likewise, when asked what aspects of interchurch unity should be expanded upon beyond the once a month “Singspiration,” most participants said cooperation in meeting social needs. The only negative to this major theme was that not one of the churches at the Maine site shared plans to implement this kind of cooperation regularly.

The fourth major theme discovered was a division among the ministers regarding limitations to church unity. There was much conversation about doctrine and the role doctrine should play in deciding which churches and which people should unify and cooperate. This concern came up in five of the nine interviews and questionnaires. Additionally, two participants said that all limits were man-made (though one of them also spoke of doctrinal limitations) while three participants stated that there were no limits. There was discussion over how egos and “sheep-stealing” caused limitations and that those limitations were created by contemporary ideas of dress and music among other things. The implication is that since these contemporary ideas did not belong in the church the church might desire to exclude those who have these ideas from their membership.

There was a major split on this issue between the clergy who participated and the laity. The laity did not see a reason for division, while the clergy were especially concerned over doctrine. There is also division over what the Bible teaches about cooperation and unity. Some believed the Bible teaches unity while others do not see a biblical mandate on the subject. One participant when pressed on this issue reversed earlier claims that cooperation has benefits to the church and implied that the whole idea of interchurch cooperation may be faulty.

The final theme revealed was a division over the understanding of the role of evangelism in the church. The participants expressed different beliefs over what the Bible teaches about evangelism and how evangelism should be implemented. Two of the contributors admitted that evangelism was difficult and time-consuming. They further stated they did not have the time or energy for evangelistic efforts. One pastor indicated that the responsibility for casting a vision for evangelism rested with the members of the church, not the pastor. Some of the contributors consider evangelism to be the act of inviting a guest speaker into the church they serve on a Sunday morning. MEE in particular made this statement when asked about the importance of evangelism: “As I view Scripture, there doesn’t seem to be any clear example of this activity outside the local assembly. I don’t see this as a truly important activity outside the local church. Having said that, there are two areas that can be helpful, I believe, within a larger venue: social justice and compassion.” So for MEE, evangelistic activity is meeting social and physical needs and what happens in the church building on Sunday morning.

In contrast, all the laity and three of the ministers interviewed felt an obligation to evangelize and reach the unchurched in addition to the Sunday morning services and

compassion ministries. Among this smaller group, there is a desire to find a way to evangelize together through actual outreaches and activities, especially directed towards the children and youth in the community. There are no substantive plans shared and the ministers were quick to give a list of what cannot be done but there was a desire to evangelize outside the church. Clearly there are differences between what the participants believe evangelism entails. Some understand evangelism as simply what happens in the Sunday pulpit. Other think evangelism is Sunday morning plus compassion ministries. Even that does not go far enough for some and they believe evangelism includes tangible outreach to the community which is not limited to compassion ministries.

The New Hampshire Site Case Study

The New Hampshire site was the most positive and optimistic site when it came to interchurch unity. All the participants welcomed and were open to the researcher's questions and request for an interview. During the course of the investigation the researcher made some observations. First, interchurch cooperation in the areas of community development and evangelism was active and growing. Second, everyone asked agreed and participated with enthusiasm. Third, the contributors provided the most uniform as well as lengthy answers as compared with the other sites. Fourth, the theological and philosophical distinctions between the ministers, even of various denominations, were quite small. Fifth, the participants truly believed in cooperation between churches and took joy in it. Lastly, this was the only site that provided a consistent biblical hermeneutic for interchurch unity rather than a focus on issues that should divide churches.

The researcher attended two interchurch meetings at the New Hampshire site. One was called “unity worship,” and the other was referred to as the “unity pastor’s prayer meeting.” At the “unity worship,” several churches gathered together at one church location, listened to music, and worshipped the Lord. The setting would be classified as a somewhat subdued Pentecostal worship service, with about 100 individuals in attendance. They had a guest speaker and musician that evening so it was not quite a typical service. The researcher observed that everyone was engaged and interested in what was occurring, except the children who ended up needing to be entertained elsewhere. The most significant takeaway from the evening was the inability to differentiate between who attended one church and who attended another. Everyone appeared to be comfortable in the setting, and there did not seem to be any awkwardness or difficulties as the members of multiple churches engaged each other. The atmosphere was friendly and congenial. The researcher was told that because of the example and leadership of the pastors, as well as this being a regular event, this atmosphere of mutual respect was common at these meetings.

The researcher’s second visit to the New Hampshire site was at a “unity pastor’s prayer meeting.” There were six ministers, not including the researcher, representing four churches in attendance. The researcher was informed that this pastors group usually included a larger number of ministers representing seven or eight churches. The meeting began very informally with a discussion about the investigation of the researcher. After that, an upcoming pastors hunting trip was also discussed.

Once the entire group arrived the pastor of the host church led the group in worship, communion, and prayer. Then the group discussed several activities in which

they are involved which included supporting a local church's mission trip to Haiti, supporting a local Christian school, and creating an interchurch Facebook page. There were several other conversations about past and future events, such as hosting a wild-game dinner for ministers and their spouses in December.

There was a welcoming atmosphere of respect and friendship around the table. These men were friends and colleagues going back for years and they trusted each other. Also what was abundantly clear was that each of them had a very genuine concern for evangelism in the community with a focus on reaching the unchurched population. A discussion broke out about the recent evangelistic effort to feed hundreds of people as a joint effort of eight local churches and the blessing and benefit from that endeavor. There was also a discussion of the limits to interchurch unity. This discussion was likely a result of the researcher's presence. This was the only time the ministers seemed to be struggling to discern their own thoughts, and a very mild and respectful disagreement took place over where the line of interchurch unity should be.

The group had held a week-long nightly joint prayer meeting. Each evening the venue moved to a different local church. One of the ministers was concerned that one of the local churches who hosted an evening of prayer was pastored by a man they did not know well. He suspected that the pastor's beliefs verged outside what was normally accepted as orthodox doctrine. A third minister who organized the prayer meetings and was at the interchurch meeting felt the prayer meeting did no harm. He also apologized if he exceeded what he should have allowed. In the end, both ministers involved in the discussion said they understood each other's point of view. The meeting itself lasted just over an hour and a half.

From the site, seven major themes were discovered through the interviews, questionnaires, direct observations, and field notes. The first was concrete plans and a unified vision from church leadership. The second was interchurch care for other churches. The third was a genuine concern for evangelism and God's will. The fourth was a recognition of the benefits of unity. The fifth was an emphasis on prayer. The sixth was a repudiation of any offenses between churches. The final was an uneasiness with disunity.

These themes were reached by reviewing each interview or questionnaire, question by question. Superfluous material was disregarded. From the twelve interview questions and observations, twenty-two narrow themes were discovered. Many of these twenty-two themes had commonalities, which were grouped into the seven larger broader themes. Of these twenty-two narrow themes, seven themes overlapped into more than one category and therefore were analyzed under multiple broad themes.

The first major theme within the New Hampshire site was that the interchurch community has concrete plans and a unified vision from church leadership. Interchurch cooperation was not an abstract idea for the future, the vision of a single minister, or something which is only done once or twice. Interchurch cooperation was an ongoing effort; therefore it was discussed by the leadership in the New Hampshire site when the researcher was in attendance. The researcher was informed that this was a regular discussion. Likewise, there was unified follow-through for the upcoming events being planned. Direction and leadership was coming from the top down; and the ministers are gently pulling their congregations in this direction.

Most of the ministers and all of the laity expressed a very positive attitude toward future interchurch activities as well as past ones. The only participant that seems to be having some concern over leading people in the direction of interchurch fellowship was NHF. The church where NHF ministers had what was described as an older congregation, and there was a little abrasiveness toward the genre of music played at interchurch events. As well, some of NHF's congregants had some older traditions such as specifically taking part in the "World Day of Prayer." NHF had downplayed this event of late due to non-Christian groups being involved. Instead NHF had favored the separate evangelical interchurch community described here. Even so, all the leadership was unified in virtually every meaningful way moving forward in their vision of cooperation at the New Hampshire site.

The second major theme discovered within the New Hampshire site is the abundant interchurch care for other churches. Both in the meetings the researcher observed and in the interviews, compassion between the church communities was expressed both by the clergy and laity. There was frequent talk of "putting aside fear," that fighting between churches is "ungodly," and that ministers were not here to build "little empires." NHC and NHD both expressed how this love in the interchurch community was a catalyst for loving one's neighbors outside the churches. These interviews demonstrate an understating among all the New Hampshire site participants that the interchurch community was important. It has to be based on real love and appreciation between all members of the community.

The contributors expressed other important concepts such as a need for trust and friendship among the local ministers first as a community begins to form. Then

afterwards a steady progression of these ideas should be introduced into the local churches they serve. The care they have for each other also expressed itself in how most of the contributors saw few to no limits for evangelical interchurch unity. They expressed a positive attitude toward any joint ventures they might do as that larger body.

There were, however, a few limitations expressed. The participant NHG expressed limitations in the area of unorthodox doctrine. Three other participant saw limits on some stances a church has on social issues. Two contributors, NHF and NHB, saw no limits to unity and care, except at the expense of the uniqueness of the individual churches they served. Yet many of the ministers during the interviews said they would support and have supported projects that helped meet needs at other area churches. They stated this support would be given even if there were no intrinsic benefits to the churches they served. Likewise, at least three ministers said they had suggested that members would be able to have their needs met more fully at other evangelical churches. Even among churches of the same denomination that reside near each other this action is rare. Overall, the contributors expressed few limitations to cooperation and desired greater unity and care for the interchurch community.

The third theme found was a genuine concern for evangelism as God's will. Every participant at the New Hampshire site said that interchurch cooperation was either "very," "extremely," or "crucially" important or of "paramount" importance. Every contributor listed outreach events and interchurch gatherings as necessary, joyful, and godly avenues to be explored and engaged in to reach the unchurched for Christ.

There was special emphasis on, and pride in, the "Feed the City" outreach. On September 13, 2016 eight churches shut down Cole Street in Berlin, New Hampshire, for

the purpose of feeding the city. At 5:20 p.m. tables were lined down the middle of the street in one straight line. It is reported that between 450 and 600 people came, enjoyed a time of fellowship, and were ministered to by this interchurch community in the name of Jesus Christ. Nearly all the participants saw this evening as a culmination of years of interchurch community building. They were excited for the future. The participants saw this as a stepping stone to greater outreach, greater Gospel sharing, and greater cooperation. The event began with prayer and thanks for the food. After the prayer, the people at each table were served a meal. Likewise, at each table there was a church leader who engaged his or her table in conversation about Jesus and why the local churches sponsored this event. There was almost perfect unity in that this was the kind of event that the interchurch community wanted to do in reaching the unchurched. Secondly, there was considerable interest to be about God's business and in God's will.

Each participant believed that to be working in God's will, they must be about meeting both spiritual and social needs in their community. They saw little to no limits on how this kind of evangelism and interchurch work can continue, as long as it is Gospel-centered. The interchurch group at the New Hampshire site has a history of similar outreach events but the "Feeding the City" event was reported as the most successful at the time. The group had other events planned for the future and hopes to capitalize on the success of "Feeding the City" as a platform for cooperative ministry.

The fourth theme is distinct but directly connected to the previous: a recognition of the benefits of unity by the contributors. As stated earlier every participant spoke about the benefits of unity and how important it was in interchurch cooperation. Some of the benefits that were spoken were of greater "godly love," greater "vision" and a greater

“impact on the community” from the church. Evangelism was listed as the greatest benefit in almost all the answers given in the interviews. Other benefits mentioned were church health and the unchurched community opening themselves up to the ministry of the church. Unity was also said to be a command of God. Therefore, the logic of following God’s commands was a most important reason and would certainly be beneficial to the church. This statement, or at least this theme, was present in all the interviews.

It is interesting to note that at least three of the participants said, in some way, that the distinctions between the churches were actually positive and important in creating church unity. They saw the distinctions not as challenges to be overcome to gain church unity (for the most part) or as reasons to have less cooperation. Instead the contributors believe they were one body with many parts and that their distinctiveness adds to the flavor and strengthens the greater body’s ability in areas that other churches maybe lacking.

The fifth theme is an emphasis on prayer among the interchurch body at the New Hampshire site. Many of the participants mentioned the need for prayer. The consensus was that praying together as the larger church was vital. In fact, the participants agreed that they would not be able to follow God’s will and accomplish anything of importance without prayer. At both meetings the researcher attended prayer played a central role.

The final two major themes discovered by the researcher were not reported at any other site except New Hampshire. The first was the tacit agreement between the ministers to handle interchurch issues of offense biblically. NHG was explicit that the ministers of the interchurch community agree to “take no offense, take no accusation,” and to work to

resolve issues biblically and amicably if possible with people who leave one church for another. NHG explained that this idea is an application from Matthew 18. If something is said about another minister or church without evidence, the hearer will not let it become gossip and repeat it to others. Conversely, if there is evidence, then the accusation would be handled biblically, as prescribed by Matthew 18. As a consequence, they will not allow the sin of offense and unforgiveness to encroach on the church; accordingly, they have covenanted to talk and work out all issues between the ministers. Finally, they have covenanted not to “steal sheep.” If someone leaves one church and begins to attend another, the ministers will talk to each other about it and look for a solution to solve the problem.

This three-part agreement was expressed by NHG, but the researcher was told that all the interchurch ministers were in agreement. The details of this came up in the different interviews. The researcher was told that this agreement is possible because of the mutual trust and friendship built between the pastors. Likewise, each minister had attempted to model this to the congregation he served.

The final major theme was an uneasiness with disunity. Several contributors spoke of a need to reject fear of what may happen and to trust God for what can happen between the churches. Not one participant said there is too much cooperation, and half the contributors said there is not enough unity and that churches should strive for more. In the history of cooperation at the New Hampshire site, initially, there were some difficulties getting a few congregations to join. However, each congregation appeared to have acknowledged a need for interchurch cooperation. At the second meeting, the conversation about the limits of cooperation was discussed. The local pastors had a hard

time agreeing on exactly what those limits were. The core group that existed was generally in agreement over core theology and social issues, yet they were open to more diverse but still orthodox churches. The participants all agreed that the group should certainly be Christian and they were open to and had worked with Roman Catholics and mainline Protestants. That being the case, there is some concern especially from NHF and NHH about some of the positions of the mainline churches on doctrine and social issues. On these points, they wrestled with theological concerns about grace and law. The question of cooperation with different theological perspectives was left somewhat unsettled by the end of the meeting and the overall question was left for another time.

The major takeaways from the New Hampshire site were the emphasis on interchurch unity and the principled and planned steps taken to implement cooperation. Interchurch cooperation was integral to the lives of these churches. It was not simply a small addition to a vision for a church. These churches and their ministers desired more unity and saw it as a biblical mandate to cooperate. They also believe it to be a vital tool essential to evangelism. The New Hampshire site churches were an example of where interchurch unity thrived.

The Vermont Site Case Study

The Vermont site was interesting to evaluate, since it contained the most extreme views on interchurch unity of all three sites. It was also fascinating as well because it was the site with the largest number of possible participants and churches who could have contributed, but the site had the least number who actually followed through. The site in many ways is divided between those who wanted to see the Kingdom of God grow in their community through joint effort and Christian collaboration and those who wanted to

see the Kingdom of God grow in their individual churches alone. Those who did want to see the Kingdom of God grow in unity were very sincere in their desire to reach the unchurched and become partners with other local churches.

During the course of the investigation the researcher made some observations. First, half of the pastors who agreed to help did not follow through. Second, there was a hesitancy among those who agreed to participate to allow their congregations to be involved. Third, though there was much talk of unity, the ministers who did participate did not know each other. Fourth, there was no invitation to any interchurch meetings given to the researcher. Finally, the researcher contacted all the evangelical churches in Rutland multiple times that had listed phone numbers or email address and received minimal responses.

Within the site itself, five major themes were discovered. The first was a strong intellectual affirmation of unity in the midst of many isolated churches in the community. The second was a strong concern yet diverse opinions about which churches should unify. The third was a recognition of the benefits of unity. The fourth was an undercurrent of disrespect among some of the churches and ministers. The fifth was a concerted effort by some churches to cooperate in interchurch unity, especially in prayer and outreach.

These themes were reached by reviewing each interview or questionnaire, question by question. Superfluous material was disregarded. From the twelve interview questions and observations, nineteen narrow themes were discovered. Many of these nineteen themes had commonalities, which were grouped into the five larger more broad

themes. Of these nineteen narrow themes, three themes overlapped into more than one category and therefore were analyzed under multiple broad themes.

The first major theme is a strong intellectual affirmation of unity in the midst of many isolated churches in the community. This theme was clear early in the process. Every individual interviewed spoke of the need for church unity when asked if interchurch cooperation in outreach and community development was good. Every participant answered in the affirmative, and some even said cooperation was “essential.” However, among both the individual interviews and those churches not interviewed, about one third of the evangelical churches at the Vermont site were isolating themselves from other churches and believers. Likewise, in the time between first contacting ministers at the Vermont site and actually setting up interviews or having the participants fill out questionnaires, there were an equal amount that agreed to be involved and participated as there were an equal amount who agreed to participate but did not attend an interview or complete a questionnaire.

Ideology was said to play a role in the isolation by the contributors. Those churches that were more associated with the Reformed movement did not want to participate. The researcher was informed that because of their ideological stances many of those churches did not desire to associate with non-Reformed churches. Furthermore, other churches limiting unity were those that would only participate in local events or events that were in social outreach context, in effect “doing good in the community.” Some participants did not see any reason to commit to interchurch prayer or to any number of other possible fellowship times.

The second theme was a strong concern yet diverse opinions about who should unify. This concern was predominant at this site and discussed more than the other sites, sometimes at length. One pastor (VTB), in particular, may have contradicted himself when he spoke of both the importance of unity and then enforced strict limitations on unifying with most denominations. His desire to cooperate was limited to only individuals or churches who hold nearly all his points of view on doctrine and practice. He accused a number of churches of preaching a different Gospel. Also he made it clear that Roman Catholics, those from mainline Protestant denominations, and even many evangelicals were not to be trusted. As a result, the minister had very little interest in cooperation.

Other participants were far more open in their view of interchurch cooperation and only limited their unity to those within the Christian faith. To the other participants, trust was seen as a positive and necessary attribute in cooperation. There was also diversity in opinions over what the interchurch community's cooperation should be. Some said there were few limitations, while others wanted only to cooperate around "service projects."

The third theme discovered was a recognition of the benefits of unity among the churches who participated, especially in the area of accountability. It was mentioned numerous times that members of one church would leave and begin attending another local church. Attenders often left because of conflict or a moral failing. Instead of resolving these troubles, the individuals would switch churches, often bringing the same set of issues to their new church home. Since cooperation between some of the local evangelical churches had been growing, these kinds of transitions were less frequent.

Communication between the ministers had created an atmosphere of openness to help people work out their issues or at least “leave well,” according to VTA. This signified that unity in the Vermont site has brought about a measure of interchurch accountability and standards for membership that are held across denominational lines. Among some of these churches, an attender will be gently confronted by both their former and current pastor in unison if there are issues that need resolution.

Other benefits to unity are a growing love for the body of Christ, a greater outreach in the community, a realization that some churches were following the teachings of Christ more closely, a better witness to their community, a greater ability to provide more services, and a favorable relationship with the local government. Again, each one of the participants agreed in theory on the importance of interchurch unity.

From the question asking about any benefits to interchurch unity the fourth theme took shape. The fourth theme is that there is an undercurrent of disrespect among some of the churches. VTB stated that one of the benefits to interchurch unity is “are getting to share the gospel with these other church groups’ members because I don’t believe they are truly receiving the gospel from some of their leaders.” This statement paired with VTB’s later answer to the question of what should or should not be done in the area of interchurch unity indicated a lack of respect for some of the other local pastors. VTB’s answer to the previous question was “Evangelism (should be done), stop watering down the message of Jesus’ shed blood for remission of sins because they are trying to get along and do all these different programs together.” These two answers point to a desire for cooperation as an opportunity to correct other ministers and possibly add membership

to one church at the expense of others. There was little to indicate a desire on VTB's part to reach unbelievers through interchurch outreach.

Even though everyone agreed on a need for unity, there was an undercurrent that suggested other churches were inferior and not truly preaching the Gospel. Interchurch unity for some in this community was seen as a method to straighten out other churches due to the inadequacy of their leadership and message. This was in opposition to the possibility of respectful fellowship and joining them in outreach. Other participants mentioned that egos, fears, and past hurts all had been present in the interchurch community and created a lack of trust and unity in this community. Twice, unhealthy competition was also mentioned as an ongoing issue of concern.

The final and most heartening theme at the Vermont site was a concerted effort by some churches to cooperate in interchurch unity, especially in prayer and outreach. VTA and VTD both shared about UNOW (United Night of Worship) events and the Neighbor Reach, a community service day. In one case, eleven of the churches gathered together with nearly 300 volunteers. The churches mixed the members into different groups at different sites where they helped clean and serve their community.

They both spoke of a "kingdom mindset" and that they wanted not only to bring benefits to their own churches but also to lend a helping hand to other local churches. There seemed to be a resolve that even if not every one of the churches was fully cooperative, they would lead their respective churches in cooperation and Christian love. The beginnings of this mindset stem from a regular pastoral prayer meeting that had been taking place for nearly forty years. Between three and twelve pastors typically attended this meeting. There was expressed a desire to expand this kind of cooperation to a "pulpit

swap” between local ministers in an earnest desire to have unity and bring about glory and expansion in the whole Kingdom of God

The Vermont site demonstrates the best and worst of church cooperation. The Vermont site is a mix of individuals and churches. Some of these participants had noble intentions and aspirations to use the interchurch community to effect positive change in the greater Kingdom of God, their community, as well as the church they serve.

However, this service was viewed by others within the Vermont site as inappropriate and even hurtful to the Gospel. From their perspective interchurch unity should only be used to take advantage of an opportunity to fix other churches. These are the extremes. Many individuals fell between the extremes and seemed to be indifferent or limited in their mindset toward interchurch cooperation.

Combined Analysis of Case Studies

Commonalties and Differences

The three sites examined were diverse and provide informative data. In many ways they represented the best of interchurch unity in a small rural church setting in northern New England. This is not to say they were all succeeding or viable but the fact remains that each interchurch community had members who were making a valiant effort in spite of many challenges. Many other communities had simply no drive to participate with one another. Yet these communities represented here had at least one church body leading the way.

The sites had the similarities and differences described below in Table 3. The major themes discovered are listed and when they are present an “M” was placed under the site indicating so. If the major theme listed was not present with the majority of

participants at their site but at least one of contributors expressed this theme, an “o” was placed under the site. This indicates an occurrence of the theme but it is not a major factor throughout. Otherwise if there was no occurrence of a specific theme at a particular site, the box which would indicate a specific theme is left blank. Finally, the themes are further divided between the pro-cooperation and anti-cooperation themes in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Case Study Site Themes

Major Themes	The Maine Site	The New Hampshire Site	The Vermont Site	
Believes unity benefits the church	M	M	M	Pro Cooperation Themes
Care for other churches	o	M	o	
Desire for Evangelism	o	M	o	
Vision/plans	o	M	o	
Desire for more unity in compassion ministries	M	M	o	
Unease with disunity	o	M		
Repudiation of offense		M		
Efforts to cooperate	o	M	M	
Emphasis on prayer		M	o	
Concern/diverse opinions over unity	M	o	M	Anti Cooperation Themes
Disrespect between churches			M	
Unease with unity	M		M	
Isolated churches	o		M	
Division over the nature of evangelism	M		o	

M - Major theme

o - Occurs among some contributors

The only complete commonality between all three sites outside of their demographics was that the vast majority of contributors at each site agreed that interchurch unity was in some ways beneficial. Then each participant gave reasons to that effect. There were a few more areas of commonality. However, none of the other major

themes show all three sites in complete agreement. One of the themes common to all three sites was a desire for more unity in compassion ministries. This desire for more joint compassion ministries was a major theme at the Maine and New Hampshire sites. This desire occurred at the Vermont site as well but not as strongly. Likewise, an ongoing effort to cooperate among churches was a major theme at the New Hampshire and Vermont sites and an occurrence among many churches at the Maine site. As well, each site had at least some concerns over where cooperation and unity begin and end but this is a lesser occurrence at the New Hampshire site. These were the major points and areas of agreement. In all other themes there was less commonality between the three sites.

The New Hampshire site was by far the furthest along and most positive toward interchurch cooperation. All the major pro-cooperation themes were present at this site, while only one occurrence was discovered among the five anti-cooperation themes. In contrast, the Maine and Vermont sites both emphasized anti-cooperation themes over pro-cooperation themes. The Maine site churches were somewhat more positive toward cooperation than the Vermont site churches. A diversity in thought and action at each site was observed.

There were two major themes that displayed principled differences among the churches at each site. The first is the repudiation of offenses between churches valued at the New Hampshire site but absent at the other two. This theme of implementing the principles found in Matthew 18 between churches was not present at the Vermont site and only vaguely considered at the Maine site. The second major difference between participants at the case study sites was the manner of disrespect found at the Vermont site. This would be an anathema at the New Hampshire site. Though the Maine site

participants deal with fear and diverse opinions about many things, there was a level of respect between participants. This level of respect at the Maine site made it unlikely that local ministers would openly correct or override another local evangelical pastor in the midst of their own church community.

Each site, though different, had a desire to do the will of the Lord and participate in some interchurch fellowship. Beyond that, views varied in the extremes in some cases. These fourteen major themes, which are further grouped into both pro-cooperation and anti-cooperation themes, have additional factors that show how effective interchurch unity can be achieved.

Factors that Lead to Effective Interchurch Unity

From the major themes, nine are considered to be positive toward interchurch unity. One of those themes, believing or stating that unity benefits the church, does not seem to be actually relevant to the level in which churches cooperate. The other eight themes are exceedingly relevant to the effectiveness of interchurch cooperation.

These eight themes are care for other churches, the desire for evangelism, a concrete vision by the pastor for unity, a desire for more unity around compassion ministries, an unease with disunity, an agreement to repudiate interchurch offense, efforts to cooperate, and an emphasis on prayer. These are displayed in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2. Eight Themes Present in Effective Interchurch Cooperation

These are the themes upon which positive and effective interchurch community is built. Churches that work toward these ideals tend to have three factors that grow an evangelical interchurch community based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The first factor is that churches and ministers respect each other. Mutual respect was present at both the Maine and New Hampshire sites. This was not full agreement and it was not even full trust; but at these two sites the participants are friendly if not friends. They understood that because they respected each other, even if everything cannot be done together, at least physical needs in the community can be met together. Compassion ministries can be organized and met by the interchurch community. Despite that another church's doctrine created an unease that affected unity, it did not necessarily hinder this mutual respect.

The second factor which resembles respect and is a positive step toward unity is mutual trust between churches. This was not present at the Vermont site and problematic at the Maine site. The New Hampshire site had churches and ministers that trusted one another. At the New Hampshire site the ministers were friends who pray together and for

each other. They had concerns about how much cooperation is good but a greater unease with disunity. They had a reciprocal agreement to cover each other and work to solve any interchurch offense through the Matthew 18 model. If there was a problem, they trusted one another enough to deal with it together. If someone left a church and went to another, they did not ignore the issue. They cared for each other and the churches each other served. Many of them recognized that, though they met at different locations, the orthodox and evangelical churches in their community were one church under Christ.

The third factor is an emphasis on the Christian call to evangelism outside of Sunday morning worship service. A real desire for evangelism and a concrete vision by the minister of a church is critical. Without a desire and a plan, nothing will actually occur. Once that desire is an actual effort the originator of the vision should attempt to bring other ministers and churches in on this effort. A desire for more unity around compassion ministries with an emphasis on prayer are also themes that contribute to this important factor. These three factors based on the major positive themes can lead to effective interchurch unity.

The themes present at the three interchurch sites that lead to ineffectiveness are found in the “anti-cooperation themes” section. They can be understood as representing three key factors found on some level at each site. They are fear, emphasizing division, and limiting of evangelism. They are an imperfect parallel to the positive factors which bring about interchurch unity. When these factors are allowed to govern most church activities, most interchurch cooperation comes to standstill. They are all at some level necessarily present at each site. For example, everyone experiences some amount of fear when new efforts are first tried. When fear is channeled into caution, it can lead to

necessary discernment that ought to be contemplated before interchurch unity should be attempted. Nonetheless, wholesale fear is unhelpful in achieving any interchurch goals.

Each interchurch site in the case studies greatly contributed to the research of church cooperation among small evangelical churches in northern New England. Specifically, the positive contribution is in the areas of on interchurch community development and outreach. The results gained are to be further examined and applied to other communities in northern New England and the church at large. The challenge in applying these results shall be the willingness of ministers and churches to learn and grow in their unity from these interchurch communities.

CHAPTER SIX: A PROPOSAL FOR INTERCHURCH UNITY AND EVALUATION

The three streams of data discovered in the research combine to form a harmony of thought on interchurch unity. Each stream shows the essential ecclesiastical need for interchurch community development and outreach. Biblically, unity in Christ is a command of the authors of Scripture. In related literature, evangelical Christian cooperation among churches is considered both wise and a sign of church health. The three case studies in this project show that where there is a lack of trust and respect between churches, they act in competition with one another and, as a result, evangelism is minimized. Where trust and respect flourish so do interchurch unity and church outreach. Where there is unity among local evangelical churches the community benefits and the Kingdom of God expands. These streams of data provide a path forward for interchurch unity.

The Overall Findings of the Study

This harmony of thought from each of the three streams of data affirms that effective interchurch cooperation is a biblical norm and mandate. As well, interchurch cooperation promotes church health and effective growth. Likewise, among those churches that were researched, those who were more interested and willing to engage in interchurch relationships tended to seek the greater good of the community and the Kingdom of God. These churches and participants have a philosophy of ministry and doctrine which led them to practice interchurch cooperation in the areas of community development and outreach. They tended to be more prayerful, less quarrelsome with other

churches, and more closely aligned with Scripture than those churches that did not desire interchurch unity. Therefore, to become more Christ-like, ministers and churches should engage in effective interchurch cooperation.

Effective Interchurch Cooperation

To have effective interchurch cooperation, a foundation of both doctrine and practice must be established. Jesus told the Pharisees (and ultimately the biblical audience) that for any kingdom or group to succeed it cannot be divided. “Knowing their thoughts, he said to them, ‘Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?’” (Matt. 12:25-26). Jesus originally intended this discussion to be applied to Beelzebul and the historical situation, but there is also stated a universal principle of cooperation that applies to any kingdom or organization. This principle applied to the church is that unity and cooperation are necessary if the Kingdom of God is going to grow and thrive.

Both Karl Barth and John Stott believed that this principle of unity applied to the church. To Barth, churches should only be seen as one body meeting in multiple places.¹ Stott discouraged the narrow and unnecessary divisions many in the church embrace.² It was and is God’s mission and eternal plan to bring reconciliation and peace to His people and the world.³ This must begin in the church which is the unification of diverse people

¹ Barth, 8.

² Stott, 12, 117.

³ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 20.

for one cause, Christ's Kingdom. The members of the church are meant to be unified with one another but this fact has become only marginally important for some churches.⁴

Conversely, there are churches, scholars, and ministers leading the way in the study and practice of unity that Christ taught. A number of these churches were examined by the researcher at three distinct sites in northern New England. This was where eight relevant themes were discovered, essential in creating an effective and biblical interchurch community.

From these themes there were three narrower factors discerned that every healthy interchurch community should have: mutual respect, trust, and an emphasis on evangelism. Even so, for interchurch relationships to grow and thrive, prayer is also foundational. One cannot expect healthy relationships between churches and ministers based only on their mutual faith in Christ if they are not first in communion with the Lord. The truth is that ultimately unity is part of God's work of reconciliation and forgiveness. This work of God is intended to replace those behaviors that have divided human beings with unity and cooperation found in Christ. It is also true that this unity is not achieved by the efforts of the church alone but it is manifested by the Holy Spirit.⁵ Even so, the church has a large part to play in unity, especially in sustaining it.

This unity is never an easy goal to attain. It requires time to take shape. Interchurch cooperation entails tangible efforts on the part of everyone in the church. Both before and after one comes to faith in Christ and joins the church, there are identity issues that tug at the believer. These divisions frequently make their way into the church.

⁴ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 24, 32.

⁵ Alvarez, 4.

The Apostle Paul deals with some of these divisions in his epistles to the Romans and to the Ephesians. In these epistles, Paul challenges churches that are ethnically and culturally divided between Jews and Gentiles, struggling to find unity in Christ. In Romans 15:5-7, the church is commanded to welcome one another. To receive each other as brothers and sisters in Christ despite their differences, thereby eliminating attitudes of division.⁶ This begins with building and maintaining respect for one another.

Paul addressed the same issue in his letter to the Ephesian church. Where there should have been unity that bound the church together as a new Temple of the Lord. God's Spirit dwells within this Temple and all other distinctions should be secondary. Therefore Paul stated, "In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22).

When this truth of being built together by Spirit of God as His dwelling place is not embraced, disrespect and division continue to flourish. Ideological agendas outside of Christ's desired unity take over and division only brings about more separation.⁷ Consequently, relational oneness in Christ and in His people becomes secondary.⁸ This can and should be corrected. There is nothing socially, ethnically, or culturally that should divide those who truly submit to the will of the Lord and seek unity. One of the most important themes discovered at the church sites in the interviews was mutual respect between churches and ministers. If this respect is achieved, the barriers to unity become removable. In both the Maine and New Hampshire sites, this respect was present.

⁶ Moo, 199.

⁷ Armstrong, 104.

⁸ Armstrong, 104.

Ministers and the churches they served at these two sites met together regularly, and were at a minimum willing to listen to one another. Although the participants did not always agree on every issue, their friendly attitudes and mutual respect enabled them to find ways to work together and honor God. For instance at the New Hampshire site, the researcher was informed that there had been cooperation slowly built over time. Not every church cooperating there had initially been involved in the interchurch efforts. However, over time with patient, prayerful, and respectful overtures, other ministers and churches had joined. At the Maine site the process was different. Even so, the barriers to unity among those church bodies were also brought down through respectful and patient invitation to find common ground in the Gospel. At the Maine site, as well as the other sites this was especially true when meeting physical and social needs in the community. The Maine churches and ministers responded positively to the idea that sharing information and joining in a group effort to help people in need would create accountably and better serve their churches and community. These efforts expanded into a free backpack giveaway to needy children. At the New Hampshire site the joint community dinner had the same effect, and continued to galvanize these churches to work in greater unison. The key before any of this could be accomplished was a building of respect between evangelical churches and ministers. Mutual respect is one of the three most important factors that bring about maturity to an evangelical interchurch community based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ has called His church to unity and to respect one another despite what defined a person before accepting the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even when these divisions enter the church, they can be overcome when the Gospel of Christ is central. The Gospel

is crucial to breaking down the barriers of division. Whatever cultural or ideological issues may exist, when mutual respect based on the Gospel is introduced, abundant unity can be achieved over natural human divisions. This requires a large measure of humility and gentleness towards others.

The Apostle Paul wrote of a need for humility and gentleness in the church, which helps facilitate harmony in Christ (Eph.4:1-16). Paul connects these attributes early in the passage to the later portion of the passage which deals with maturing in the faith and cooperation within the body.⁹ The passage ends with Paul declaring that each believer must learn to live as part of and within the greater body of Christ.¹⁰ According to Paul he wrote, “From whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). Ample reasons can be found to divide, yet the church is called instead to mature through humility and gentleness and thereby work toward unity in and through Christ.

Humility provides a foundation upon which trust can be built. Trust which leads to respect is a further step in binding believers together. As the church members who respect each other are also humble with one another; they learn that friendship and unity in Christ breeds trust and real love. Paul wrote of a new maturity in the faith that can and should spill out into the interchurch community in Ephesians 4. This step of earning and accepting trust was a challenging progression in maturity to the contributors who were

⁹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 350.

¹⁰ Patzia, 246.

interviewed. However, at the New Hampshire site, humble trust-building cooperation was achieved.

At the New Hampshire site, there was an unease with disunity because of the biblical mandate to unify. There was also this unease because the ministers at the New Hampshire site were friends. They shared, trusted, and prayed together. They modeled the Matthew 18 principle of dealing with offenses and resolving them instead of ignoring or building upon them. Forgiveness and humility were key. At the New Hampshire site, the clergy modeled a philosophy of ministry that the churches they serve were one church under Christ that met in different places. The New Hampshire site is a model of gentle humility and trust, as Paul writes of in Ephesians.

At the Maine site, and even at the Vermont site there were ministers and churches willing to humble themselves and disregard negative emotions in order to strengthen the larger church community. One minister at the Vermont site in particular was willing to work with other evangelical ministers and churches despite the casual detachment of other community pastors. Likewise, at the Maine site it was through humility and time earned respect that some of the ministers changed their minds about the narrowness of their cooperation, and allowed for broader evangelical traditions (Pentecostalism) to join them in their joint worship. In both cases previous concerns, whatever negative feelings they were built upon were relinquished, and value was placed in Christ-centered unity.

Churches and ministers who desire to build an interchurch community should act accordingly. They would do well to refuse anger and bitterness by embracing forgiveness and valuing one another.¹¹ This often means humbling oneself to build godly trust and

¹¹ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 34-35.

unity. Interchurch unity must be based in the understanding that other churches which preach and teach the Gospel are part of God's Kingdom as well. Pride has no part in God's Kingdom and trust as well as forgiveness must be pursued.

It is important to bring an interchurch community together. Once the foundation is laid, not only is Christian identity understood and embraced but also trust and respect are built between churches in Christian humility. It is at that point that interchurch outreach and evangelism can begin. This result leads to an emphasis on outreach and evangelism which is the third major factor in any healthy church or interchurch community.

The Christian call to evangelism outside of Sunday morning worship services is essential. This does not simply happen; there needs to be a concrete vision presented by the pastor to the church. Without a desire and a plan, nothing of substance will actually occur. This desire should not stay in a local body but should grow into a joint effort by multiple churches working together. This is especially essential in the area of compassion and social justice ministries. Churches should desire more unity in compassion ministries initially as a means to reach the unchurched. Additionally, it makes it easier to join churches together. It is hard to argue that cooperating to feed hungry people is against the mission of the church.

John 17:20-21 is the clearest biblical basis for church unity. Köstenberger writes about this passage, "His prayer is for their unity. For it is Jesus' desire that through the unity of His followers the world may come to realize that the Father sent him."¹² Jesus' prayer shows a link between unity of the church and the reception of Christ by the unchurched. The unity of diverse believers in Christ is intrinsically a part of evangelism.

¹² Köstenberger, 172.

In the family of God, there is essential unity in Christ, which is meant as a witness to the world.¹³ Köstenberger writes, “Unity (together with love) constitutes an essential prerequisite for evangelism.”¹⁴ Jesus and Paul teach that division in the church renders the testimony of the church ineffective.¹⁵ Unity is a vital outward display of God’s love, and this unity becomes a testimony to the world.¹⁶ It is where evangelism and outreach can excel. Individual believers and church bodies should be committed to work through problems rather than divide.¹⁷ This is not only for the church’s benefit but for the sake of the unchurched community around them. Vischer writes, “For our witness to the gospel to be credible we must overcome the separation and bring to clear expression our common life in Christ.”¹⁸ Division in the church contradicts the biblical principle of reconciliation. Even those outside the church understand this principle.

The church has a critical role in interchurch unity. This striving for harmony begins in prayer. Interchurch unity begins with dependence on God not on what humanity can achieve. Prayer is vital for unity and one’s desire for unity can be measured in the degree in which one prays for it.¹⁹ Without prayer, interchurch cooperation is unlikely to ever happen. Unity is never isolated as something for itself, but it must continue to stay

¹³ Tenney, 167.

¹⁴ Köstenberger, 172.

¹⁵ Dobson, 21.

¹⁶ Dobson, 21.

¹⁷ Armstrong, 164.

¹⁸ Vischer, 2.

¹⁹ Crow, 79.

founded upon Christ and His mission.²⁰ If prayer is the start of interchurch unity, it must lead to ministers and churches bearing each other burdens, meeting together cooperatively, and developing true personal relationships.²¹ Yet these things should not be rushed, for maturing in the unity of Christ often takes time.²²

Early in the church's development, unity was normative and expected. Luke wrote about this as a model for the church²³ even in the twenty-first century (Acts 2:42-47). Fellowship in particular is critically important. Notably it was early in church history that the body "had all things in common," in verses 44-45.²⁴ It is also true that thriving compassionate unity has an evangelistic component by meeting basic physical needs of those both inside and outside the body of Christ. The early church was unified around these purposes in their faith.

The biblical and theological basis for unity should not be understated; it is a frequent, vibrant, and essential concern of the New Testament. This pursuit is foundational to the hope for cooperation. Likewise, as the modern church is being pressed from many directions, it is the opportune time to find strength in the greater body of Christ. As well, the church cannot ignore the witness of Christ to the unbeliever.²⁵ The only question is how to begin?

²⁰ Lloyd-Jones, 70-77.

²¹ Coleman, 20-23.

²² Coleman, 28.

²³ Williams, 59.

²⁴ Williams, 61.

²⁵ Mehl, 201.

Doctrinally, the Apostles Creed can be a statement of faith to find theological unity within. It is an early statement of the Christian faith which affirms the essential Christian beliefs.²⁶ If common ground can be found there, considerable good can be achieved. Another option is an evangelical COCU or Church of Christ Uniting, which would be an agreement to have a large group of churches and fellowships work, pray, and study for as long as possible to bring about a reunion.²⁷ Determining to unify around the core aspects of the Gospel is imperative and an important place to begin. What should be opposed is separating over “adiaphora” or “things indifferent.”²⁸ Matters of Christian liberty and differences over secondary doctrines should not divide the church.²⁹ All doctrine should be examined to attempt to make the distinction between what is core doctrine to the faith and what is secondary doctrine. This would not be an easy process but it might be a fruitful progression toward unity. All of this requires a call to prayer and personal interchurch/interdenominational relationships.

As much as possible close fellowship should be pursued. Aside from denominational affiliation, the ultimate task of the church is to proclaim Christ. This compels the church to seek unity.³⁰ Barth writes, “The quest for unity of the Church must in fact be identical with the quest for Jesus Christ as the concrete head of the Church.”³¹ As a church grows closer to Christ they should also grow closer to His greater body. Paul

²⁶ Armstrong, 79.

²⁷ Frame, 132.

²⁸ Bruland, 31.

²⁹ Bruland, 31-32.

³⁰ Barth, 10.

³¹ Barth, 13.

wrote, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). This should include normative fellowship, care for those in one’s church, as well as care for those in Christ in other churches. The church began with concern for all its members and not simply those members who met in one specific location. Therefore, this oneness based on the Gospel, which points to Christ as the head of the body of believers whom He who brings health and life,³² should stand and work together.

Robeck writes that the place to begin building interchurch relationships is first by praying for one another, building real friendships between ministers, and getting on the same page about basic needs.³³ There are challenges and obstacles along the way, but this is how churches begin an interchurch community. Starting off small is not a bad objective. A church can begin to do simple things on its own to promote interchurch unity. Along with prayer, a positive and necessary step to begin this process would be to call and introduce oneself to the other local ministers.³⁴ Ministers and churches need to follow Christ’s example of practicing forgiveness for any past problems between local churches and find ways to humbly serve one another with no expectation of a reward.³⁵

Therefore, a local interchurch group can do the same things that a local church can do. The only limitations are those the group places upon itself. Once a few churches

³² Alvarez, 8.

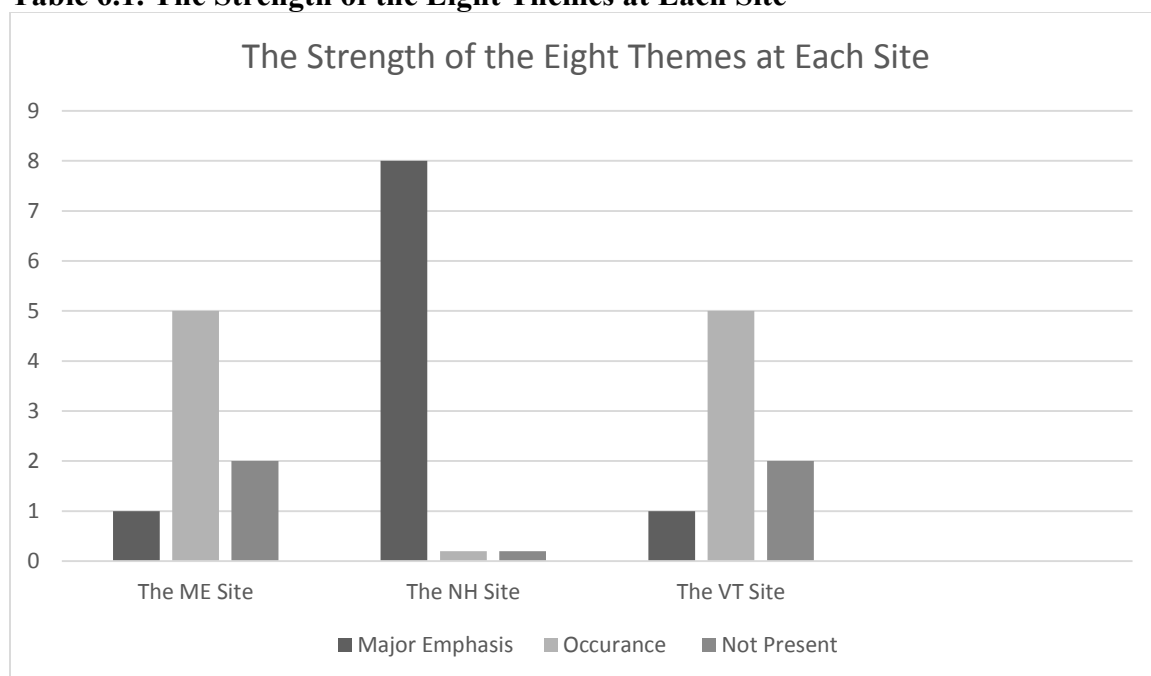
³³ Robeck, “Pentecostal ecumenism: overcoming the challenges--reaping the rewards: understanding the nature of ecumenism (Part 2),” 9, 12-13.

³⁴ Frame, 165-169.

³⁵ Frame, 165-169.

and ministers begin to help each other in basic areas like compassion ministries or collaborate in joint events, real unity has begun to be embraced.³⁶ These joint efforts do not all have to take place at a particular church building. To alleviate pressures, they can be done at neutral locations.³⁷ Home Bible studies are good ways of interchurch fellowshiping once trust has been established.³⁸ The interchurch case study sites were each in the process of attempting interchurch cooperation. The strength of the eight pro-cooperative themes found at each site are displayed in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1. The Strength of the Eight Themes at Each Site



Effective interchurch cooperation can be a long process. It begins with a biblical foundation that compels unity as an essential component, a necessity in any kingdom, especially the Kingdom of God. This should lead to an understanding that the body of

³⁶ Duncanson, Johnson, and Weisgram, eds., 7-8.

³⁷ Frame, 75.

³⁸ Frame, 75.

Christ is not one group or organization but an organism in which there should be harmony centered on Christ.³⁹ This is constructed on minister's building respect through relationships and putting aside those natural cultural, social, and ethnic divisions everyone has before Christ. What follows closely is the building of deep trust through Christ-like humility and gentleness. Once that is achieved, the interchurch community can move from simple community development to interchurch outreach and evangelism. This should be the heart of all evangelical churches. Interchurch unity will hopefully resemble the church in the Book of Acts, a caring, thriving, growing, and loving Christian community of one church in many locations.

Sabotaging Interchurch Unity

In the New Testament, unity is commanded but in practice is often disregarded for any number of reasons. There are some rationales why Christians should be cautious of interchurch unity, such as when a form unity outside of the faith is placed above the Gospel. However, evangelical churches and ministers who are Christ-centered and Gospel-focused should find cooperation a matter of great importance. This is not always the case. In fact, there are those who appear to sabotage interchurch unity for other ideologies or traditions. Whether intentional or not, there are common anti-cooperative themes and the problem of sin (specifically the sin of selfish ambition) which make collaboration difficult.

The most prominent of these themes is fear. Unity of the church is always an act of overcoming fear. Interchurch unity for some is no less than an act of complete faith, that God will preserve the individual church one serves, while expanding the depth of His

³⁹ Alvarez, 8.

kingdom. Nevertheless, fear is powerful. Even the participants most dedicated to unity had at least some sense of fear that they would lose something in building an interchurch community. Maintaining divisions can be tempting due to fears.

Differences create fear, which is a challenging obstacle to overcome and a psychological barrier to unity.⁴⁰ There is fear of losing traditions, fear of change, fear that a pastor or church will be forced to do or accept things they do not want.⁴¹ Yet, if the believer understands that fear is essentially a lack of faith in God's will for the church,⁴² they can also understand that unity despite those fears will be honored by God. What is necessary is faith. The church needs faith enough to trust God and accept real Christian love and reconciliation.⁴³

Paul had to deal with numerous issues of division. In First Corinthians 12:15-26, Paul condemns the often held belief that there are parts of the body or members in Christ who are unnecessary and should be excluded. Paul makes the application from the importance and purpose of the body to the immediate concerns and divisions in the Corinthian church. All parts of the body are necessary, and if the whole body were all the same parts, then the body would be in dysfunction and incomplete, according to verses 17-19. Therefore, the church needs unity because of its member's individual differences; otherwise what exists would only be a monstrosity.⁴⁴ The whole is greater than its parts.

⁴⁰ Crow, 21.

⁴¹ Crow, 21-22.

⁴² Crow, 21-22.

⁴³ Crow, 21-22.

⁴⁴ Fee, 609-610.

Yet, the parts exist and have importance within the whole, not simply despite their differences, but because of their differences.

In verses 22-23, Paul writes that those members whom one might see as unnecessary, “weaker,” Paul calls “indispensable.” Those individuals that seem to be “less honorable,” should be accorded “greater honor” on them thereby demonstrating the importance of all in the body. The body of Christ has been arranged by God to create mutual dependency upon one another. Thus, the whole is hurt by the absence of different parts of the body.⁴⁵ God has not built a diverse body to create strife, but so that the body may function by mutually meeting one another’s needs.⁴⁶ This point in First Corinthians 12:25-26 is key; “that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” (1 Cor. 12:25-26). Accordingly, there should be no division among the body of Christ, which includes the interchurch community.

Fear however, was a common theme at every site. The New Hampshire churches attacked the issue of fear and agreed to talk through any fears, concerns, and anxieties in order to keep them from growing. The Vermont site participants expressed concerns about doctrinal impurity, but in at least one case decided the answer to this fear was to work against most cooperative efforts. At the Maine site though there were contributors who expressed their fear very honestly. In one case, one of the ministers said they feared what the larger clergy group would think of him if he associated with pastors who were not already approved by the ministers he already associated with. Another fear admitted

⁴⁵ Soards, 265.

⁴⁶ Fee, 614-15.

to, was losing congregants to other churches. Here the participants honestly expressed these fears, but seemed to be at a loss for a solution. The best solution was presented by the New Hampshire churches, who were willing to walk through these fears with one another, in community, as the larger church.

Another anti-cooperative theme is an emphasis on division. Paul condemned leadership divisions in the church when he wrote, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Cor. 1:10). In verse 11, he reported that he has heard of “quarreling” in the church, something he desired to correct. He poses rhetorical questions to put the church back on the correct path forward.⁴⁷ “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). Paul’s point is that division over lesser issues, in this case by choosing one leader over another, denigrates Christ and in essence misunderstands unity and ignores the Lord’s centrality.⁴⁸

Here and elsewhere in the Bible, the New Testament authors rebuke independence and factions and emphasize harmony in the church,⁴⁹ yet many Christians simply do not obey. Today, there is unnecessary competition between evangelical churches, and leadership is often at the center of it. When leadership is humble division should never be an issue. When there are divisions, at least one of these contentious groups has not taken enough time to discover from prayer and the Bible the correct course of action. Likewise,

⁴⁷ Soards, 34.

⁴⁸ Soards, 36.

⁴⁹ Frame, 27-28.

if leaders are acting against one another, their motives should be scrutinized. This leads directly into another way of sabotaging unity, and that is through selfish ambition.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 2:3, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, count others more significant than yourselves.” (Phil. 2:3). Paul continues in verse 4 stating that the interest of others should be placed above the interest of self. Placing one’s ambitions before others is an act of selfishness and conceit. A major contrast then between unity and disunity is that of selfish ambition over and against humility.⁵⁰ Kent wrote that from this passage one can understand that “consideration for others must precede concern for ourselves ... this will go far toward removing disharmony.”⁵¹ Often though a way to disrupt interchurch unity is to seek personal benefit before the interchurch group, before the unchurched community, and before the Kingdom of God.

At the New Hampshire site, selfish ambition was routinely rejected. Instead, there is interchurch respect, trust, and growth. Should one of the churches or ministers seek their own ends at the expense of the others, this would certainly shatter the interchurch community. There would be no trust, and respect would be called into question. Furthermore, at the New Hampshire site there was tangible respect and a kingdom mindset. On at least one occasion there was no youth program at one church, so to meet the family’s needs they were encouraged to go to another church in this network that had a strong youth group. In smaller ways the rejection of one churches own ambition was present at some of Maine site churches. For instance, there was support of some outreach

⁵⁰ Bruce, *Philippians*, 62-63.

⁵¹ Kent, 122.

projects such as a backpack giveaway that did not directly benefit some of the churches which supported it. In both cases to different degrees the greater Kingdom of God was embraced over the specific desires and anxieties of the individual churches and participants. At the Vermont site, where trust and respect are less common, unity was a tenuous commodity. For there to be unity, there have to be individuals willing to accept and trust the work of regeneration from Christ in others.⁵² When this occurs ambitions can be shared and directed by Christ, one's own ambitions can fall away and interchurch unity can be achieved.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 12:3: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." (Rom. 12:3). He writes this because just the opposite was normal in the Roman church at the time. The church was experiencing social and ethnic divisions. In part, these divisions were causing disunity since each group (Jews and Gentiles) thought themselves better than the other. They lacked the humility to see that those who were unlike them should be put before themselves. There was a lack of respect because of self-centeredness and this in turn created disunity.

Selfishness or self-centeredness and all the ambitions one brings must be overcome in order for cooperation to thrive. The good that an interchurch community can do will only be poisoned if individuals seek their own gains, without caring for other believers. Unity in Christ and His Gospel should be the ambition. Together an

⁵² Lloyd-Jones, 71-72.

interchurch community can strengthen itself for the benefit of the Kingdom of God and moreover for those who lack faith in Christ.

Morgan uses Ephesians 4, another text dealing with unity, to make a list of Christian deeds and attitudes which curb selfish ambition. This list includes: valuing and being gentle with others, patience, promoting peace and unity over self, truth over manipulation, refusing anger, refusing to speak negatively about the church or other churches, putting away bitterness, and embracing kindness and forgiveness.⁵³ Selfishness cannot survive when these biblical truths are practiced.

The final item in sabotaging interchurch unity is to limit evangelism and outreach to the job of the clergy on Sunday morning. This idea is not something recorded in the New Testament. Most often the New Testament writer's record outreach and evangelism as essential church practice unlimited by time or space. The only instances where these were limited were times when God directed someone to go evangelize elsewhere. The most famous example of this would be Paul's Macedonian call where, in Acts 16:6-10, the Holy Spirit directs the Apostle Paul not to evangelize in Asia but instead take the Gospel to Macedonia.

Some ministers and churches have mistakenly seen fit to limit what Christ in the New Testament commands the church to do, "Go and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19a). This limitation of evangelism and outreach took several shapes in the different churches examined in this study. There was one theme that was the same throughout: the Sunday morning pulpit was the primary evangelistic tool on a weekly basis. Nowhere in the related literature or in the theological research was this idea promoted. As well, no

⁵³ Chute, Morgan, and Peterson, eds., 34-35.

rationale for this was given by any of the participants. Limiting church evangelism and outreach not only stunts church growth, but it also severely limits those things that churches can do together for the community and the Kingdom of God.

There are numerous issues that can sabotage interchurch cooperation. Whether these troubles arise in the form of fear, sin, placing unbiblical limits on evangelism, or insignificant reasons to discard unity, each one should be rejected. They are an imperfect parallel to the positive factors which bring about interchurch unity. When these factors guide churches, interchurch cooperation comes to standstill. Each of these is a trap ministers and churches fall into. The purpose of the trap is to have Christians avert their priorities from Christ and the Kingdom of God to lesser matters of tradition, sin, or fear. Therefore, the evangelical church ought to be vigilant as these issues are bound to occur somewhat regularly. At this point, the church should take immediate action and label them for what they are, a distraction; then accept healthy biblical cooperation in their place.

Other Factors

The resolve to participate in interchurch unity, and the rejection of those things that harm unity are where churches can begin to find common ground with one another. Regrettably, there are several other factors that need to be addressed before unity can come to fullness in a community. These factors include two limitations of interchurch unity and an examination of the culture and history of the area of ministry. Specifically the focus is northern New England in this project. These factors should be considered before a serious attempt at interchurch cooperation is made in northern New England,

because these dynamics can help a church to discern what is appropriate and God honoring.

The two limitations that affect evangelical interchurch unity are governmental political agendas and unorthodox theology and practice. Dealing first with unorthodox theology and practice, this is an ever growing and murky phenomenon. At one time, churches that labeled themselves Christian were more or less orthodox Christian. There would be differences in the mode of baptism, the meaning and nature of the Lord's Table, traditions, doctrines but for the most part, the Gospel was preached. Each church at least affirmed basic core teachings like the Resurrection of Christ.⁵⁴ There were always some that became unorthodox. Not always but typically, they called themselves by various names to indicate their new path, such as Unitarian or Mormon. Today, this is not often the case. Even within denominations, agreement on how to approach Scripture and scriptural intent is hotly debated.⁵⁵

This was also true in the first century. A prime example is in the epistles of John. The elder dealt with a difficult situation affecting the unity of the churches he oversaw (2 John 1:7-11). The apostle's and church's authority was under attack from "deceivers (who) have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh" (2 John 1:7). Apparently these teachers were heretics who denied the most basic tenets of Christianity.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ "National Association of Evangelicals: Statement of Faith," nae.net/statement-of-faith, (accessed January 3, 2017)

⁵⁵ Balmer and Winner, 150-154.

⁵⁶ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 10-11.

This was not the only time an event like this transpired in the first century. Earlier in church history, Jewish Christians were claiming a need for the Old Testament to be kept in tandem with faith in Christ as an act of partial grace, which is also a heresy. Paul utterly condemned this in the strongest terms in his letter to the Galatians. (Gal. 1:6-10, 2:11-21). In both cases, false teachers were coming to house churches and spreading their false doctrine. This demonstrates why the elder in Second John 1:10 commands the church to exclude them from fellowship as the only resolve to such a serious situation. Otherwise false teachers who denied essential aspects of the Gospel would lead others astray.⁵⁷ This was unacceptable, unchristian, and the church needed to reject such teaching.

Therefore, unorthodox doctrine and practice should give pause to unity. Whatever aspects of commonality can be found, a church without the Gospel is a church not established by Christ. Early in church history it was understood by the church to separate from heretical elements. Ultimately, the elder John and the church leadership after him excluded teachers from participating in the church who had already excluded themselves from Christ. To stop the spread of heresy, there were biblical limits placed on church unity. This meant that fellowship and cooperation with a false teacher as part of the church body would cease.

In both ancient and modern times for example, unity between Christian churches that affirm the bodily Resurrection of Christ would not make much sense with churches who do not affirm a bodily Resurrection. That is a primary example of a belief fundamental to Christianity itself. The principles that clarify where unity begins and ends

⁵⁷ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 70.

must be found in the definition of what an evangelical (or at least orthodox) Christian is. The National Association of Evangelicals statement of faith may help evangelical churches understand with whom they should cooperate.⁵⁸ The basic doctrines of orthodoxy must be affirmed by any church which seeks to unify on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second factor that has limited unity is governmental political agendas. One's political position on most issues should not exclude others from fellowship with other evangelical and orthodox Christians. As well, one's political positions should not be the central reason for interchurch unity. Unity should be found in Christ and His Gospel; other matters may be important but should always be secondary. When interchurch or parachurch groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals and the World Council of Churches have been overly inclusive⁵⁹ or overly divisive,⁶⁰ the Gospel has suffered. Ideological, social, and governmental political agendas of the ecumenical and interchurch movements have often caused divisions,⁶¹ making relational oneness in the mission of Christ and His people secondary.⁶² This should never be. Unity in Christ and His Gospel should always be primary.

A final consideration of this project is the religious history and culture where this study developed. Northern New England is an area of the United States that has and

⁵⁸ National Association of Evangelicals: Statement of Faith," nae.net/statement-of-faith/ (accessed January 3, 2017)

⁵⁹ Vandervelde, 98-99.

⁶⁰ Anderson, 489.

⁶¹ Armstrong, 104.

⁶² Armstrong, 104.

continues to be religiously unstable, and hosts contentious interchurch relationships.⁶³ Orthodox Christians are a small minority of the population.⁶⁴ It is an area that has faced a decline of religious communities, and a large and increasing number irreligious people, and has a small number church attenders, especially evangelical Christians. The interchurch community as well as individual local churches can only thrive if these concerns are taken into account. Therefore, understanding both the historic and modern day challenges of northern New England is important in the pursuit of interchurch outreach and cooperation. Division and divisiveness among the body of Christ in northern New England has been a troubling phenomenon and has shown to perpetuate the already present disorder. It must be rejected. Otherwise unorthodoxy, faithlessness, and church decline will only continue within northern New England. Petty divisions can be put aside. The church can stand together and support its mutual members with respect, while becoming an example that can attract the unchurched.

No matter where a church or interchurch community is located, the culture, values, and history should be considered when pursuing interchurch relationships. In northern New England understanding its culture and history is vital to reaching and relating to the unchurched, and overcoming the obstacles between churches.

Consideration must be given to pervasiveness of governmental political agendas in the church. Governmental political agendas should not be allowed to estrange fellow believers, but they need to find unity in the Gospel of Christ. When appropriate, and always secondarily, those governmental political issues that churches do unify around

⁶³ Balik, 36.

⁶⁴ Balik, 1, 7-8, 36, 45.

must be inherently moral. The final and most difficult factor to navigate as a minister or as a church is the issue of unorthodox churches. Before interchurch cooperation is attempted, basic doctrine should be examined and decisions should be made about how much cooperation is appropriate. When the most important doctrines of the faith are in questions, the church must always side with the Gospel. These factors are often challenging to the body of Christ yet should never be ignored.

The overall findings of this study are that effective interchurch community development and outreach are biblical, wise, and mark a healthy church. It must be something that ministers and churches strive to establish and support. Equally, things like: fear, division, selfish ambition, and the limitation of evangelism should be rejected. Likewise, cultural norms, an overemphasis on politics, and unorthodox theology are all factors that must be carefully considered when unity is at stake. Interchurch unity is ecclesiastical theology that is too often overlooked but can lead to a healthier more Christ-like church. Every follower of Christ would benefit and should desire a church which more closely reflects Christ's love and harmony.

Recommendations

Most ministers and churches would agree that outreach and fellowship are positive and godly endeavors. Many may never have considered how much more interchurch cooperation could accomplish in these areas. Interchurch community development and outreach are important yet often overlooked Christian ideals. The recommendations below can aid a community in making progress in these areas. Though the path will differ for some, the basic mechanics presented here will be helpful, especially for those who minister in northern New England. With all that has been

researched, a plan of action is offered to those who would desire to implement interchurch relationships within their community.

Individuals and churches should start with prayer. It should be obvious to a Christian but often it is not, and the Holy Spirit must lead any church effort. Likewise, praying for other local churches and other ministers will soften one's heart for their needs. Prayer will help change any negative views that are presently holding back interchurch cooperation.

The first thing a minister should do (after they have spent time praying for guidance from God) is to reach out to all local churches. The definition of a local church may be problematic. For those within rural northern New England, any church within a 15 minute drive from the church one serves is local. In rural northern New England, it is unlikely that there is more than a dozen or so churches at that distance. In other regions and states with more churches, the distance may need to be limited or expanded. Whatever the exact range, there have to be enough churches in the area to gain interest. As well, these churches need to be close enough to have regular fellowship. The larger the number of churches and ministers working together the greater significance this unity will have for the Kingdom of God. However, even two ministers and churches can have interchurch fellowship and unity.

The churches contacted should not be limited to evangelical churches. However, the focus should be on evangelical ministers and churches. Whether or not churches can or will work and worship together, it is good for one to build friendships across denominations and faiths. The biblical limits to interchurch cooperation need to be considered within interchurch activity, yet a minister should be a good neighbor to

everyone. If there is an interchurch group already established, the inquiring minister will be likely to find it in this manner. If there is not one already established, it may take time and continued effort to get a response from one or more of these churches. For instance, the researcher tried calling different churches for nearly a month before he was able to get any response. Some churches and ministers never responded; others eventually did. At this point in the process, persistence is key.

It is also wise and important that a minister reaches out to other clergy, especially at first. Reaching out to laity at other churches can become problematic and intentions can be misconstrued. Contacting the laity first may cause further introversion from already suspicious churches and clergy. Once communication has been established and interchurch activity has been discovered or found wanting, interchurch community development can begin.

This process begins with gaining the respect of the other local ministers. This means truthfully dealing with the local church and/or denominational history that may be problematic for the other churches or ministers. Tactful truth is encouraged, as well as humility. The point is to graciously admit past mistakes by the church one serves or the denomination one is aligned with if challenged. Whatever challenges the other minister, church, or denomination may have presented to the church one serves in the past, forgiveness is an overture to a Christ-like bond that will hopefully develop. The intention is to assure the perspective interchurch ministers that what they are joining together in unity for is the Gospel.

Before anything else can occur, a friendship must be built between the clergy. What churches and ministers have in common is of critical importance. Certainly,

recognizing and admitting flaws and ecclesiastical differences can bring about greater understanding, yet it is emphasizing the Gospel that will bring unity. Practically speaking, the first minister who returns your calls should be invited to lunch.

Furthermore, pick up the tab. Goodwill is often gained through simple acts of service and humility. When possible, establish with as many evangelical ministers as possible some means of gathering on a monthly basis. Depending upon the nature of the relationships after the first meetings, interchurch relationships may in turn take off or slowly simmer. Two tracks must be discussed at this point, the slow track and the fast track:

Slow Track

The slow track means that interchurch community development is non-existent or has stalled. Either way one needs to have a vision for it to excel. It must be noted that there is a balance between being obnoxious and being persistent. The newer one is to the community he or she serves, the more one has to be careful of the former behavior. One's ideas will not always be accepted; therefore humility is a necessity.

Whatever the status of the interchurch community, one should seek regular fellowship with other local evangelical ministers. Suggest a monthly meeting, whether the centerpiece is prayer, food, or some other activity. Then let the other ministers choose what the meeting will entail and then join in enthusiastically. Most of the time clergy are at least willing to spend an hour a month with other clergy. There is not much that can go terribly wrong and they may view it as an opportunity to convince you of their point of view on any number of issues. This will build some level of mutual respect and friendship. Not every pastor will join and that is okay. But as long as some do, progress will have been made.

How things progress will depend on the doctrinal bent and the individual personalities. Mutual respect needs to be built and trust needs to be earned. This can take years before anything else occurs. In the researcher's case it was almost five years. Patience is key. Once there is enough trust between ministers, trust can carry over to the congregation they serve (in both doctrine and practice.) At that junction, much more should begin to occur. Times of joint corporate worship or prayer are usually the places where interchurch cooperation can originate. Pulpit swaps and joint services are more difficult to arrange, especially at first. However, they can be discussed. What must be understood is that if there is real friendship between the ministers, they can disagree, debate points of view, and laugh at themselves without fear that the group will fall apart. From here, joint outreach is also possible.

Fast Track

If an interchurch group is discovered to already be in place, its effectiveness must be evaluated. Is the group growing, seeking to reach the unchurched, and respectful and trusting of each other? If so, one's first priority is to join. One's second priority is (with the greatest respect) to participate and guide the group to improvement. There must be the assumption that interchurch community development, trust and respect have already been established. Likewise, that whatever interchurch tensions exist, they are being biblically dealt with as they occur. It also means that the faith community is already fellowshiping together, and the interchurch activity is expanding and not contracting.

Opportunities for evangelistic and outreach in the community should be examined. If it is an economically-depressed community (like much of rural Maine) opportunities are only limited by imagination, willfulness, and strategic resourcing. In

accordance with biblical precepts and prayer, different churches can gain a vision to meet local social needs. These opportunities to outreach can then be supported by other local churches without duplication and thereby not wasting resources. For example, if one local body within a close distance of the church one serves has a vision for (or is already operating) a clothing distribution for the needy, support it. The job of the interchurch community should not be for every church to start their own clothing distribution. Whatever good can be done, it should be done at one centralized and centrally supported church. The job of the interchurch community should be to send all their extra clothing and, if possible, funds to purchase clothing, to the one church excelling at this ministry.

While this is happening another church may have a vision for a food pantry and the same applications should apply. The goal is joint cooperation that eliminates competition and duplication. When dealing with small churches and limited budgets, this process can be both edifying to the church and the community. Yet, not everything can be handled in this way. Projects that meet social needs that occur on an annual or semi-annual basis like backpack distributions or a dinner for the whole town or a local clean-up-the-town day can be fully cooperative efforts where all the churches hold equal responsibility under a point person.

The other kind of outreach is what is commonly known as evangelism. This can be more difficult because of differing doctrine. While compassion ministries often have few detractors and both evangelical and orthodox churches are involved with them, there are valid disagreements in the area of evangelism. Respect and understanding are key. At times churches and ministers will have to agree to disagree agreeably and not stake the whole fellowship on one event.

Joint evangelistic outreach for some churches and ministers used to mean presentations like “Heaven’s Gates and Hell’s Flames,” but in the twenty-first century, this is a very narrow point of view. Vacation Bible Schools, Easter egg hunts, children’s events, local Christian concerts in the park, unity candle light vigils (for a common pressing biblical need) as well as those traditional evangelistic church building-centric outreaches are all starting places. These are just ideas and each interchurch community can pick and choose these options or perhaps come up with their own programs.

As strange as it may sound, weddings and funerals are times when interchurch cooperation and most notably Christ should shine. Clearly it is not the desire that any ministers or the interchurch community want to take over one of these events. But how much would it mean to a grieving family to find the interchurch community coming together to take care of the food and flowers at the funeral service? How much would it mean to them if the interchurch community has come out to mourn with them? It would mean a great deal and Christ would be recognized as the motivator of such love. The point is that faith in Christ is not introverted and only personal. Faith and unity is meant to spread from church to church and into the unchurched community. It begins in prayer and it ends with changed lives and communities.

Interchurch home Bible studies and discipleship opportunities can be difficult but are not impossible. They may be the last thing attempted because of so many issues of doctrine that are not sufficiently agreed upon. A suggestion is that if these are attempted subjects and texts are carefully chosen. Something like the *Discovery Bible Studies* can be used across denominational lines to overview major biblical themes. Whatever is decided upon, leaders of these groups should be deliberate in presenting basic biblical

truths, without intentionally getting into murky areas of theology. However, when people unintentionally stumble into areas of disagreement, grace should be given.

Whichever track is taken, the end result should be mutual respect between churches, mutual trust among ministers, and a growing desire to unify as the larger body of Christ. There should be a concerted interchurch effort as well as innovative ways of outreach to the unchurched. There is no perfect model, no specific way this has to manifest. Actually, in different communities the interchurch may look radically different. As long as the Gospel is the center, Christ is glorified, and churches grow in health and love, then what good occurs should be encouraged to continue.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Project

Strengths

This project has a number of strengths. The most notable strength of this project is the identification of a problem in an area of the world that is not often studied from an ecclesiastical perspective, northern New England. Recently, New England itself has not been known for being a particularly religious or evangelical region. Northern New England epitomizes religious apathy: hence ecclesiastical studies in this region are often overlooked. When northern New England is studied or surveyed the typical investigations revolve solely around religious affiliation or church attendance. The researcher is unaware of any study in this area of the United States that has dealt with interchurch or church cooperation. Therefore, the problem and effects of minimal interchurch cooperation on both the church and the surrounding community are unknown. Consequently, the project has another strength in its uniqueness.

Another strong point of this project is that it approaches the subject of interchurch unity from an evangelical viewpoint. Ecumenism, the much broader subject of religious unity, is often explored. However, the narrower subject of evangelical interchurch cooperation is studied significantly less often. Although there is some information in the academic world on this topic, it is not a richly developed subject.

Outside of the subject's uniqueness, there is also a strength to be found in the process by which information was gathered. There are three data streams in the project: the related literature, the biblical and theological data, and the interchurch case study data. The case study data is from multiple sites in which the researcher explored the need for interchurch unity and how different interchurch communities cooperate. From this third source of data, there were multiple cases studied within three sites (in three different states many miles away from each other), providing the project with unique perspectives. These sources of data strengthened the project and ensured the findings of this project to be reasonable and accurate.

An additional strength of this study is found in the forthrightness of the participants. The contributors felt at ease and were honest enough to share information and perspectives that they likely would have known to be negatively viewed. Still they shared how they truly felt. One participant openly admitted to working against other evangelical churches. Another confessed to fearing other local ministers and a few others admitted part of the reason they limit interchurch activity was their insecurity from fear of losing attenders. Ministerial disagreements were also witnessed by the researcher. This project was able to record sensitive and authentic situations and difficulties in the interchurch settings without much subterfuge from the participants.

One of the strengths of this project were identifying authentic interchurch difficulties and the possible solutions of how to solve those problems. An additional strength was finding good model sites to contribute. The final strength is the fact that the information from these sites is both raw and transparent. The contributors did not hide their honest feelings or vital information from the researcher.

Weaknesses

The first major weakness of the project was in the number of case studies the researcher was able to complete. It would have been helpful to analyze more sites and interview more contributors at each site. Nonetheless, the lack of further opportunities were a limiting factor for the researcher. For the investigator to do an exhaustive evaluation, more case study sites would have been necessary. However, it was difficult to find more sites willing to participate.

A fourth site in northern Maine would have been interesting to evaluate. This is because the culture of northern Maine (mainly Aroostook County) is somewhat different from the rest of Maine. The metro-Portland area, which is made up of seven or eight communities, is culturally very different than the rest of the state. It is urban and consequently outside the scope of this project. The southern half of the state up through Bangor, excluding the Portland area, also has a different culture than Aroostook County in northern Maine. It would have been interesting to get a perspective from there. It was attempted but to no avail.

The second weakness is the number of contributors at each site. With the exception of the New Hampshire site, the researcher was not able to get everyone to participate. Multiple attempts were made, especially at the Vermont site, yet these

attempts were sometimes without success. The researcher was especially interested in getting Reformed and Lutheran perspectives. There are a number of moderate Calvinist churches represented in the project, but only one theologically Reformed church is represented. Most fully Reformed churches never returned the researcher's phone calls. One Lutheran church was targeted without success. The project had a number of Baptist, holiness, Pentecostal, and independent churches, but many of them, especially at the New Hampshire site were theologically Arminian.

A final weakness (yet in others ways a strength) was the researcher's primary connection to the Maine site (being a local minister there.) Also, his minor connection to the New Hampshire site (where the researcher's wife's family attends one of the local churches) could be viewed as problematic. This is a strength in that it allowed the researcher access and greater support from the participants. However, there is always the possibility that some influence may have affected how a few contributors responded. Likewise, there is always a shade of bias when the researcher is involved directly with one's research.

The researcher does not believe these weaknesses influenced the research in any significant way that would change the conclusions from and response to this project. In fact, the weaknesses themselves were for the most part unavoidable and should be viewed in that way. The strengths of this project, slightly more in number and more so in importance, vastly outweigh the weakness of the project.

Suggested Modifications

The only major modification which could be made in a future project is the addition of time to gather more information. With more time, it is possible that more sites

could be examined and possibly more contributors from those sites could be rallied to participate. There are also some related topics that could be examined in unison with interchurch unity, such as the decline of the church in New England. Nevertheless, that would greatly increase the scope of the project. That perhaps would benefit from a separate project. Other modifications might include a different strategy in approaching ministers to participate. It may help to incentivize them to contribute with some reward for filling out a questionnaire. This may help gain a few more participants but not many more.

The project's desire and purpose is for church bodies to unite in Christian solidarity and interconnectedness. The larger body of Christ, the church universal, is not an abstract idea to be ignored. The invisible church includes billions of individuals past, present, and future, which make up the temple of God. To assume that one church or denomination, however good and biblical, is exclusively "the church" is absurd. Yet, this belief is often found in the attitudes of many ministers and church attenders. Evangelical Christians who teach that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God should put into practice the unity and cohesion between believers it prescribes. That is the mandate that the biblical authors teach. As long as competition, unbiblical traditions, and fear direct individual churches, this will not be achieved. Interchurch cooperation, respect, and outreach are based upon the biblical principles of unity and should be taken seriously. Unity can be achieved by obeying the Bible and the Holy Spirit, and working toward mutual respect, trust, and a desire to see the unchurched reached in their communities. This project offers a path and a solution to guide individuals and churches in this direction.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PERSONAL REFLECTION

There is considerably more that can be explored after this thesis project. There are further questions of theology and practice surrounding the idea of interchurch community that can be additionally investigated. Likewise, there are further sites to evaluate and discern how they have developed or neglected interchurch relationships. Finally, there should be a future in-depth examination of the decline of the church in northern New England and in the northeastern United States. The researcher finds of special interest this decline, studied in tandem with the effects of positive or negative evangelical interchurch unity. The many questions which arise out of all these items deserve attention and engagement in the future. Nonetheless, they are all items and ideas that will need to be set aside for the moment.

The researcher has been challenged by his investigation through this project. In addition to desiring a deeper relationship with the other ministers in the region where he serves, the researcher has been stretched to develop a balance between the various demands on his time. Since beginning this assignment, opportunities to minister the Gospel and disciple others have arisen. By the grace of God and because of this project and the program, better outcomes have resulted. The researcher was able to make many connections and learn from various evangelical leaders throughout northern New England. Indeed, this result was specifically due to the researcher's field research as he investigated several interchurch communities.

The process has reshaped the researcher's thinking and viewpoint of the world around him. What the researcher observed was that positive and negative efforts from the simplest actions, traditions, and history associated with the church have a great impact on the Kingdom of God in northern New England. The process of deliberating on all that was discovered was both challenging and enlightening. It required restraint. The act of not automatically jumping to conclusions continuously had to be kept in check. Restraint was also necessary during the interviews. The researcher had to refrain from showing apprehension or excitement when what was being expressed by the participants seemed foreign, troubling, or affirming of what he believed about the question or situation. The process required the researcher to look practically at the project and begin to look objectively at his own failings with his interchurch involvement. Now that this specific research is over, the researcher seeks to correct errors and implement changes to the community he serves.

As to the process itself, a good portion of the project was fairly straight-forward. The researcher believed he had a solid foundation to work within when he began. Beforehand, two of the three sites were already chosen and pre-screened to ascertain if they might be interested in helping with the project. There were challenges though. The first was in finding literature that was written about interchurch cooperation, and the church in northern New England. There is quite a bit written about ecumenism, which is briefly reviewed in the project. However, ecumenism is a much broader subject than what was necessary to be investigated. There were a number of books and articles that the researcher believed would report on the subject of interchurch relationships but proved to

be of little help. Still in the end, an adequate amount of material was discovered. Finding information about the church in northern New England was just as challenging.

The other major challenge was choosing a third site to study. The researcher had a difficult time getting phone calls and emails returned from a number of possible participants. The researcher at first received help at the Vermont site in gathering some interested ministers from a friend in town, who also participated. Immediately, he received back two questionnaires. However, over the next month and a half, no interviews or questionnaires were scheduled or returned. This was not from a lack of effort. Numerous phone calls and emails to area churches went unreturned. Several Vermont site ministers who initially agreed to participate never followed through after numerous attempts to remind them. Ultimately, two more contributors finally participated. More than once, the researcher considered dropping the site because of a lack of interest. Nevertheless, no other reasonable site could be acquired; there was however a second site in Maine that was considered throughout the process. Once four of the participants followed through, the researcher believed that there was enough information to study, and actually it was the lack of follow through that became important to the research at that site.

The ministers at the Vermont site believed that interchurch relationships were good. That may have been their perspective, but disorder and many critical blind spots were exposed. This revealed that the Vermont site was more likely indicative of other interchurch communities in northern New England than the two other case study sites. So in the end, as frustrating as the Vermont site was in providing information, it likely

showed the real troubles plaguing northern New England. It needed to be included in this project.

At the New Hampshire site, the researcher's experience was joyful. The participants would be the first to admit they were not doing everything right, but they were trying tremendously hard to be both biblically orthodox and compassionate to their church and unchurched community. They were an easy group to like, and the contributors wanted to be helpful. They were not typical for northern New England, but the site is an example of what can be achieved with interchurch unity. Interestingly, it is also a site that twenty years ago was experiencing the same extreme church decline as the other church communities in the "North Woods" are now facing. Since this cooperation began, though these church bodies are relatively small compared to the rest of the country, they have grown—and not at the expense of one another. There have been church closings in the past ten years but not on the same scale and not from among the churches involved in this group. The New Hampshire site had a vibrant Christian community of evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and some mainline churches unlike much of the rest of the rural areas of northern New England.

As for the Maine site, which is the researcher's home, it was difficult to be objective. In the four years that he has been involved in this doctoral program, there have been many changes in this ministry setting. Two church plants have failed in the past five years and another established church has closed. Other churches failed before the researcher arrived. As churches in the area seem to one by one fail and isolate further, the influence of the church in the researcher's community and ultimately that of Christ has waned. Similar waning has happened in many communities in northern New England.

Where churches excel at bickering, their decline has only accelerated. A desire to see interchurch fellowship and cooperation have been key goals for the researcher.

There is hope that the interchurch community is growing slowly at the Maine site. There is anticipation that it will move forward but much is still uncertain for now. The researcher's experience in this project has given him resolve to continue to pursue healthier interchurch relationships so that the relationships between the churches can grow and heal from any past mistakes. These churches can present a unified witness in outreach to the unchurched community. The goal of the project is to expand interchurch cooperation in this area, for the glory of Christ and to expand His kingdom in biblical and meaningful ways.

Disunity is a terrible witness to the unchurched community. When evangelical churches which believe the same core Gospel truth degrade each other, the body of Christ is made to look foolish and self-centered. One church may take advantage of this as the "city on a hill" church. However, in the long-term, no single church can replace all the surrounding church bodies. To attempt to be the only Gospel witness, to be the only pillar of the community, and to meet the spiritual needs of multi-town municipalities spread out over dozens of square miles is arrogant and presumptuous. Multiple and diverse church communities are needed to meet the needs of the greater community. They are needed to compensate for the blind spots of the other churches and to be Christ's ambassadors in the community and to even learn from one another.

What will the church look like in these communities studied in ten, twenty, and fifty years? If introverted churches continue to languish in northern New England, will these communities that have been studied contain even half the local bodies they do now?

Traveling through this vast rural landscape of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine, one sees abandoned or remodeled-for-other-use church buildings liberally scattered about the region. Only in the few dozen urban centers of northern New England is there considerable church growth. Sometimes that growth is at the expense of smaller, more rural community churches. This is not to say these larger urban churches are not doing good and bringing the Gospel to the unchurched, but this is a side effect mentioned by a number of ministers. One piece of creating and sustaining Christ-centered churches in northern New England is having a dynamic and healthy interchurch community.

The research project conveys a desire to see biblical, healthy, and flourishing interchurch unity. The researcher's vision for interchurch unity includes the sharing of resources and joining in outreach to strengthen the remaining church bodies in the small, rural towns of northern New England. This project illuminates a potential pathway to achieving this vision.

This project is a picture of hope but only a starting point. The knowledge gained must be applied to improve and elevate the church at large. Still unanswered are the questions: What else can be done? And what are some of the pressing reasons behind the slow disintegration of the church in the researcher's community as well as much of northern New England? Large systemic issues must be addressed but at least part of any answer is a rejection of church infighting, fear, and stubborn, unhelpful, unbiblical traditions and theology. All of which make unity difficult. Though there is much more to be explored, unity in Christ is possible when egos, selfish ambitions, and fears are set aside. Among evangelical Christians, unity will be found when the Gospel of Christ and His kingdom are made truly central to the church.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW/QUESTIONNAIRE

INTERVIEW/QUESTIONNAIRE

I want to thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview/questionnaire. I would also remind you that at any time you may discontinue this interview/questionnaire. Before we begin I would like to make sure you are aware of some terminology in these questions to avoid confusion.

- By community development, the interviewer means, a process in which a church or churches are growing in the grace of God, through relationships, accountability, teaching, and acts of service.
- By evangelical the interviewer means, historically orthodox Protestant Christians who more specifically and at a bare minimum hold to these most basic tenants of faith; the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, Jesus Christ being both God and perfect Man, the Trinity, Creation ex nihilo, the fallen nature of man, salvation alone through the atonement on the cross, the Resurrection of Christ, and His Second Coming.
- By interchurch the interviewer means, cooperation between different local evangelical churches.
- By outreach the interviewer means, to reach beyond the church into the surrounding unchurched community, in the areas of evangelism and compassion or social justice ministries.

1) How important is evangelical interchurch unity, and cooperation in the area of community development?

2) How important is evangelical interchurch unity, and cooperation in the area of outreach and or evangelism?

3) What do you believe are the limits to interchurch unity and cooperation?

4) Are there any theological, moral, philosophical, or other reasons to those limits? What concerns might you have?

5) How does your church/interchurch community cooperate?

- 6) If there is interchurch cooperation in your community, please describe any important history of how this began, and continues?

- 7) Do you believe the current state of interchurch cooperation is excessive, at an appropriate level, or should be expanded? And why?

- 8) What is being done or should be done to change that state of interchurch cooperation, if any changes would be made?

- 9) Please describe any benefit to the current state of interchurch cooperation in your community?

- 10) Please describe any disadvantage to the current state of interchurch cooperation in your community?

- 11) Is there anything else evangelical churches in your vicinity should be doing, or should stop doing in the area of interchurch cooperation?

- 12) Do you have any future plans in this area?

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