

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia:
Addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity Through a Multifaceted Approach

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to
the Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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August 2023

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, June 28, 2023

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Pastors and church leaders within the Rocky Mountain Church Network, an association of 48 churches, face difficulty caused by ideologically driven disunity (IDD). Current polling shows IDD's negative effect on pastors, church leaders, and congregations. Due to the foundational nature of ideologies, attempts to alleviate IDD have typically worsened the situation. This action research project seeks to identify the presence and impact of IDD as well as provide a strategy and tools to address IDD in a congregation. Using surveys, focus groups, and personal interviews, the researcher acquired quantitative and qualitative data from 22 project participants that affirmed the data revealed and discussed in the current literature. The researcher created three primary tools for addressing IDD: a three-week devotional detailing the relationship between the Great Commission and congregational unity, a three-week sermon series, and a presentation that gave research results, conclusions from the data, and the strategy for addressing IDD. As ideologically driven disunity is present in many churches and other scenarios, this research project has the potential to assist leaders in various settings address IDD. By understanding the nature of ideologies, possessing tools to address IDD, and focusing on the mission of the organization, organizational leaders in churches inside and outside the Rocky Mountain Church Network, as well as in secular settings, can help the groups they lead to be more effective and minimize stress in their own lives.

Key Words: Disunity, Ideologies, Mission, Congregation, Pastor, Leadership, Organizational health

Dedication

This project would not have been completed without the encouragement, support, and love of my wife, Lori. Thank you for your understanding and patience as our routine has not had much routine in it for the past season. I'm looking forward to returning to a "normal" rhythm together as we love God and love each other.

Acknowledgment

The RMCN Board of Directors has been gracious in giving me the permission and time to develop the thoughts in this work. Their encouragement and participation have helped leaders in our network have the tools to navigate some of the most difficult situations they face. The pastors and church leaders who participated in this project gave time, effort, and honest feedback as the project progressed. I am truly blessed to be a part of what God is doing in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| DMIN | <i>Doctor of Ministry</i> |
| ESV | <i>English Standard Version</i> |
| FBC | <i>First Baptist Church</i> |
| IDD | <i>Ideologically Driven Disunity</i> |
| IRB | <i>Institutional Review Board</i> |
| PCC | <i>Pearson's Correlation Coefficient</i> |
| RMCN | <i>Rocky Mountain Church Network</i> |
| VCN | <i>Venture Church Network</i> |

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

These are troubled times, both outside and inside the church. Political strife and cultural divides impact many areas of life. Navigating conversations in the public arena has become more and more difficult as opposing sides become increasingly intransigent and the manner in which people express their opinions becomes more vitriolic.¹ This has led to broken relationships among families and friends, with 16% of respondents in a 2016 poll saying they “stopped communicating with a friend or family member because of the 2016 presidential election.”² Ideological convictions have become stronger, resulting in the ossification of societal strata.

The fracturing of American culture along political lines is evident, with ideological tension increasing at an alarming pace.³ Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt notes,

It’s been clear for quite a while now that red America and blue America are becoming like two different countries claiming the same territory, with two different versions of the Constitution, economics, and American history. But Babel⁴ is not a story about tribalism;

¹ Myles Werntz, “The Cost of Christian Unity,” *Review & Expositor* 116, no. 1 (2019): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637318821868>.

² Joe Pinsker, “Trump’s Presidency Is Over. So Are Many Relationships.” *The Atlantic*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/03/trump-friend-family-relationships/618457/>.

³ “USC Pulled out of Hosting L.A. Mayoral Debate, Citing ‘Escalating Tension in Modern Politics,’” accessed April 26, 2023, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/citing-escalating-tension-in-modern-politics-usc-pulled-out-of-hosting-mayoral-debate/ar-AA11otff>.

⁴ Haidt uses the biblical account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 to illustrate the division and discord seen in current culture. He likens the conflict caused by the inability to communicate after God confused mankind’s languages to stop the building of the Tower of Babel with the inability of people holding differing ideologies to communicate with one another, resulting in similar conflict and discord.

it's a story about the fragmentation of everything. It's about the shattering of all that had seemed solid, the scattering of people who had been a community.”⁵

Differing ideologies, terminology, and even concepts of truth have resulted in a lack of acceptance of others who may view the world through a different lens. This occurs as three major forces that have the potential to bring differing sides together are minimized.⁶ The first of these forces is social capital, a network of relationships built on trust. Having social capital results in giving others the benefit of the doubt when they hold differing ideologies. Not having social capital results in viewing those who hold differing ideologies with suspicion and distrust,⁷ neither of which are foundations upon which unified relationships thrive. The second force is having strong institutions⁸. The experience of life is often centered upon institutions that are familiar and enduring. Having such institutions may add stability and commonality to relationships. The absence of such institutions can create an environment in which others who hold differing ideologies are viewed as oppositional because there is not an outside influence creating a shared experience. The third force is having shared stories. As people have shared experiences, they will be more likely to accept others who may hold differing ideologies as they have formed a bond through enduring similar hardships and experiencing similar joys. Haidt contends that social media has “weakened all three.”⁹

⁵ Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>.

⁶ Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.”

⁷ “‘Anger on Their Minds’: NBC News Poll Finds Sky-High Interest and Polarization Ahead of Midterms,” *NBC News*, October 23, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/first-read/anger-minds-nbc-news-poll-finds-sky-high-interest-polarization-ahead-m-rcna53512>.

⁸ Strong institutions may include churches, schools, nonprofits, media outlets and governmental agencies. These all have the potential to create a unifying bond through shared experiences.

⁹ Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.”

The influence of social media on ideologically driven disunity has been clearly documented. Haidt points to two innovations that have exacerbated ideological tension in American culture: the “Retweet” button on Twitter and the “Share” button on Facebook. These two innovations allowed individuals to not only affirm the thoughts of an article or tweet, but also to pass them on to their social media followers. This gave rise to more vitriolic interactions and the formation of oppositional tribalism. Haidt notes, “The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves. The volume of outrage was shocking.”¹⁰

Social media platforms have played a major role in the divisions seen in American culture. Andy Stanley describes the attitudes seen in these divisions, saying, “There’s an enemy and they’re winning, so you need to buckle down and swing further left or further right, because we’re losing.”¹¹ The zero-sum game nature of ideological discussions is worsened through the use of social media platforms, as the influence of social capital, strong institutions, and shared stories is diminished due to removing the proximity and humanity of those with whom one may disagree. The “Hidden Tribes” study, which surveyed 8,000 Americans in 2017 and 2018, revealed that those who were on the extremes of the ideological spectrum were much more likely to share political content than those who held more moderate views.¹² Those who held the most conservative views in the “Hidden Tribes” study “share a narrative in which America is eternally under threat from enemies outside and subversives within; they see life as a battle between

¹⁰ Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.”

¹¹ Carey Nieuwhof, “Andy Stanley on How Politics, Partisanship, Ideology, and Theocracy Are Damaging the Church, and the New Metrics of Ministry,” *Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, May 9, 2022., podcast, 51:52 <https://careynieuwhof.com/mypodcast/>.

¹² Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.”

patriots and traitors.”¹³ As treason is punishable by death, those who hold the most conservative views are often unwilling to engage in meaningful, civil discourse with those who hold a differing view, even if that view falls on the conservative side of the ideological spectrum. Conversely, those who hold the most liberal views believe that “life at every institution is an eternal battle among identity groups over a zero-sum pie, and the people on the top got there by oppressing the people on the bottom. This new narrative is rigidly egalitarian focused on equality of outcomes, not of rights or opportunities. It is unconcerned with individual rights.”¹⁴ As those who hold the most liberal views hold others who do not hold the same views as racist or demeaning, they are often not willing to engage in meaningful discussion with them.

While Jesus’ prayer in John 17 clearly shows his desire for his church to display unity, many congregations experience the same ideological discord and disunity seen in culture in general.¹⁵ Many within the church have shifted their stance from opposing that within culture they believed to be contrary to Scripture to opposing other believers who may hold different ideological stances. Tim Alberta notes, “To many evangelicals today, the enemy is no longer secular America, but their fellow Christians, people who hold the same faith but different beliefs.”¹⁶ Many of the same distinctions have been drawn, with those holding the most conservative views seeing others as enemies or subversives and those holding the most liberal views seeing others as racist or uncaring. These values have created an environment in which ideology informs theology rather than the converse. Alberta paraphrases a pastor he interviewed

¹³ Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stephen B. Pecota, “The Unity Project: Assisting Local Church Leaders in Navigating Extreme Partisanship in the Body of Christ,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (D.Min., United States -- Missouri, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2022), 121, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (2632125217),

¹⁶ Tim Alberta, “How Politics Poisoned the Evangelical Church,” *The Atlantic*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/06/evangelical-church-pastors-political-radicalization/629631/>.

by saying, “The pastor said his concern was not simply for his congregation of 300, but for the millions of American evangelicals who had come to value power over integrity, the ephemeral over the eternal, moral relativism over bright lines of right and wrong.”¹⁷

The shift in focus of American evangelicals has not happened quickly. During the 1980’s, evangelicals recognized that, as a voting bloc, they could influence cultural issues such as sexuality, drug use, and abortion. However, as the three strong forces that enable unity in culture were diminished, the impact evangelicals had on culture waned. Additionally, the ideological impact that evangelicals had during their successes created an atmosphere in which biblical values were muddied. Alberta writes,

Short-lived victories, however, came at a long-term cost. Evangelical leaders set something in motion decades ago that pastors today can no longer control. Not only were Christians conditioned to understand their struggle as one against flesh and blood, fixated on earthly concerns, a fight for a kingdom of this world—all of which runs directly counter to the commands of Scripture—they were indoctrinated with the belief that because the stakes were getting so high, any means was justified.¹⁸

Russell Moore, the public theologian at *Christianity Today*, believes that this issue is universally present in congregations. He notes, “I don’t know of a single church that’s not affected by this.”¹⁹ As this is a near-universal issue, it is imperative for pastors and church leaders to gain an understanding as to how to address ideologically driven disunity. Without addressing disunity in an effective manner, the influence of traditional media, social media, and opposing extreme ideological views will continue to hinder congregations’ ability to fulfill the mission to which Jesus calls them. Stéphanie Dietrich writes, “The divisions between human people, between

¹⁷ Alberta, “How Politics Poisoned the Evangelical Church.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

churches and traditions, are an obstacle to the church, because of God's call for Christian unity."²⁰

From political debates to racial tensions to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and all that accompanies that discussion, churches have faced ideologically driven disunity as believers either knowingly or unknowingly place their ideologies over their theology and understanding of Christian living rather than placing their ideologies in subjection to the clear teaching of Scripture. The same intransigence and vitriol seen broadly in culture are present in congregations in opposition to the New Testament's exhortations to display unity. Ephraim Radner writes, "Division is always the consequence of *two persons*' actions, never of just one schismatic individual."²¹ When believers who hold differing ideological beliefs do not subject them to the gospel, the result is disunity even though they may hold the same doctrinal truths. Churches within the Rocky Mountain Church Network often display these attitudes. If these congregations do not address the disunity caused by ideological tensions, the result will be increased stress on ministry staff and diminished gospel effectiveness.

Ministry Context

To understand the ministry context addressed in this thesis, one must understand both the context of the Rocky Mountain region generally and the Rocky Mountain Church Network specifically. While the congregations of the Rocky Mountain Church Network are impacted and influenced by the culture in which they are located, there are some factors inherent in churches

²⁰ Stéphanie Dietrich, "God's Mission as a Call for Transforming Unity," *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 2 (December 2018): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12237>.

²¹ Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* (Waco, UNITED STATES: Baylor University Press, 2012), 65. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=1034648>.

aligned with the Conservative Baptist Association of America (now Venture Church Network) that have allowed a spirit of individualism, dissent, and separatism to continue largely unabated as a matter of pride rather than attitudes of which believers and congregations should repent. This discussion of the ministry context addressed in this thesis will detail the demographics, politics, and religious attitudes of the Rocky Mountain region, the history of the Conservative Baptist movement along with the history of the founding of the Rocky Mountain Conservative Baptist Association (now Rocky Mountain Church Network), and the current state of the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

Demographics of the Rocky Mountain Region

The Rocky Mountain region is a diverse collection of urban metroplexes and rural towns. These different contexts bring diversity to the region; however, these two differing contexts create an environment in which resentment and snobbery are sometimes evident, with city-dwellers and rural communities looking down on one another due to a lack of understanding the nature and benefits of the contrasting lifestyle. This is exacerbated by the influx of people moving into the region from larger urban areas hoping to escape the pressures of living in an extremely large urban center such as Los Angeles or San Francisco. While the population growth of the United States was at a record low from July 2020 to July 2021, growing by just 0.1%, several states in the Rocky Mountain region experienced much greater growth. Idaho, which is not a part of the Rocky Mountain Church Network but is considered a Rocky Mountain state, grew by nearly 3%. Utah and Montana, which are serviced by the Rocky Mountain Church

Network, both grew by 1.7%. This contrasts with the state of California, which saw a population decrease of over 350,000 people in the same period.²²

Colorado has experienced two decades of notable growth, having increased in population by over 16% from 2000 to 2010 and again from 2010 to 2021,²³ resulting in a current population of 5,860,047. While the explosive growth the state has experienced is expected to slow, Colorado is expected to grow by 14% by 2031. The population change will include a moderate increase in school-age children. The Colorado workforce is closely split between blue-collar and white-collar occupations. The religious attitudes of Coloradans vary greatly, with some opposing beliefs held by approximately the same percentage; for example, 20.5% strongly disagree with the statement “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell” and 26% strongly agree.²⁴

Utah’s growth has been even greater. From 2000 to 2010, the population grew by 23.8%, followed by 19.9% growth from 2010 to 2021.²⁵ This growth resulted in a population in 2021 of 3,314,212. Utah’s growth is expected to slow substantially over the next ten years, with an anticipated increase of 15.5%. As with Colorado, growth is expected in the number of school-age children, and occupations are closely split between blue-collar and white-collar. The religious beliefs of Utahns are more monolithic than the other states served by the Rocky Mountain Church Network, with overwhelming majorities strongly agreeing with statements such as “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell” and “I have a relationship with one living God.”

²² The Associated Press, “Mountain West States See Growth,” KECI, December 21, 2021, <https://nbcmontana.com/news/local/mountain-west-states-see-growth>.

²³ Home - MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

²⁴ Home - ReligiousInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

²⁵ Home - MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

Furthermore, overwhelming majorities strongly disagree with statements such as “I don’t believe God exists” and “I believe God created the world but takes no further part in it.”²⁶

Montana’s growth was not as substantial as Colorado’s or Utah’s over the past two decades, growing 9.7 % from 2000 to 2010 and 11.3 % from 2010 to 2021, resulting in a population of 1,100,792.²⁷ Montana’s growth is expected to slow more drastically than Colorado or Utah’s, with a projected increase of 5.3% in the next decade. Montana’s workforce is closely split between blue and white-collar occupations. Montanans’ religious attitudes are slightly more consolidated than Colorado’s, with more than three times strongly agreeing with the statement “I have a relationship with one living God” than strongly disagreeing.²⁸

Wyoming, the least populous state in the nation, experienced growth as well for the past 20 years, increasing in population by 14.1% from 2000 to 2010 and then increasing by 5.4% from 2010 to 2021,²⁹ resulting in a population of 594,074. Wyoming’s anticipated population growth is approximately the same as Montana’s, with a projected increase of 6%. As is true of the rest of the Rocky Mountain region, the workforce is closely split between blue-collar and white-collar occupations. Religious attitudes are similar to Montana’s, with nearly twice as many people strongly agreeing with the statement “I believe God created a literal heaven and hell” as strongly disagreeing.³⁰

²⁶ Home - ReligionsInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed May 1, 2022.

²⁷ Home - MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

²⁸ Home - ReligionsInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

²⁹ Home - MissionInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

³⁰ Home - ReligionsInsite by ACS Technologies, 2022. Accessed March 17, 2022.

Table 1.1 Rocky Mountain population growth by decade

| State | Growth 2000–2010 | Growth 2010–2021 | Expected Growth 2021–2030 |
|----------|------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Colorado | 16% | 16% | 14% |
| Utah | 23.8% | 19.9% | 15.5% |
| Montana | 9.7% | 11.3% | 5.3% |
| Wyoming | 14.1% | 5.4% | 6% |

The demographic data indicate that the Rocky Mountain region has great potential to experience kingdom growth. The people moving to the region experience life-changing transitions, often relocating due to a change in employment and either moving either further from or closer to family. During life-changing transitions, people are frequently more open to spiritual input and counsel. This is evident in the explosive growth seen in a campus planted by Life.Church in the northeast area of Colorado Springs, an area that is experiencing tremendous building and growth. Life.Church’s campus, planted in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, now reaches nearly 2,000 people.³¹ While the spiritual perspectives of residents of the Rocky Mountain region are diverse, they reveal either an openness to spiritual discussion or the need for spiritual renewal. The dual factors of life-changing transitions and spiritual perspectives should give those hoping to engage in gospel-centered ministry in the region optimism and energize them to fulfill the Great Commission.

Political Diversity

While three of the four states in the region served by the Rocky Mountain Church Network reliably vote Republican (Wyoming, Montana, Utah) there is often a wide diversity of

³¹ Debbie Kelley, “Life.Church, Founder of Popular Bible App, Opens \$10.4 Million Church in Northeast Colorado Springs,” Colorado Springs Gazette, accessed June 5, 2022, https://gazette.com/news/life-church-founder-of-popular-bible-app-opens-10-4-million-church-in-northeast-colorado/article_ae4dc4c0-d5bb-11eb-98e1-1fb306b9c65f.html.

political affiliation and activism. These diverse political identifications sometimes present themselves near one another. An example of this is seen in two bordering counties in Colorado, approximately 35 miles north of Denver: Boulder County and Weld County. Boulder County is one of the most politically and culturally liberal counties in Colorado. Joe Biden carried Boulder County with 77.2% of the vote and in the last four years Boulder County residents gave \$18,723,399 to the Democratic Party and liberal campaigns as opposed to \$4,642,031 to the Republican Party and conservative campaigns.³²

Weld County, which borders Boulder County to the east, is in many ways the opposite politically and culturally as one of the most politically and culturally conservative counties in Colorado. In the last presidential election, Donald Trump carried Weld County with 57.6% of the vote and residents of Weld County gave \$1,146,685 to the Republican Party and conservative campaigns versus \$542,129 to Democratic Party and liberal campaigns.³³

The proximity of two vastly different political climates can create tensions within churches. In a conversation with the researcher, a pastor of a church that previously had campuses in Boulder and Weld Counties said, “We’re tree-huggers and gun-toters.”³⁴ This diversity has often created tension within churches in the Rocky Mountain region but was seen to a greater extent through the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the political diversity of the area has the potential to create disunity even among those who would hold similar political views. Those motivated by fear of losing political identity or political power often begin to hold

³² “Politics & Voting in Boulder, Colorado,” <https://www.bestplaces.net>, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.bestplaces.net/voting/city/colorado/boulder>.

³³ “Politics & Voting in Weld County, Colorado,” accessed March 18, 2022, <https://www.bestplaces.net/voting/county/colorado/weld>.

³⁴ Conversation with James Buchanan, Associate Pastor of Children’s Ministries at Grace Church, Longmont, CO, March 14, 2022.

increasingly extreme ideologies and reject those who hold more moderated ideologies. This has led to families leaving congregations when they believe their ideological stances are not being promoted. This occurs even when the stance of the pastor or church leadership is like those who have left.

Location and Nature of Rocky Mountain Church Network Churches

Churches associated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network are in each of the four states addressed in the demographic statistics, with the addition of two churches in neighboring states. There are 29 churches in Colorado. There are eight churches in Wyoming. There are four churches in Montana and five in Utah. There are two churches located in states not typically associated with the Rocky Mountain region: one in Kansas and one in Nebraska.³⁵ As the area is large geographically with, at times, few churches in proximity, the individualism seen in the Rocky Mountain region can create problems in connection between churches and the Rocky Mountain Church Network. This may reflect the historical foundation of the Conservative Baptist movement and the Rocky Mountain Conservative Baptist Association.

The Rocky Mountain Church Network services a multifarious collection of churches. There are congregations that average 20 attenders each week and several that average over 1,000 attenders each week, with the largest church reaching over 2,000 people weekly. Necessarily, there are churches that have solo or bi-vocational pastors and churches that have multiple layers of organizational accountability in the staff structure. There are churches that have very traditional worship music incorporating hymns and choirs and churches that have cutting-edge contemporary music incorporating a worship band and multimedia presentations. There are

³⁵ "Church Search," Venture Church Network, accessed June 29, 2022, <https://venturechurches.org/map/>.

churches that are strongly complementarian in their approach to women in leadership positions and churches that have female elders.³⁶ The structure and founding of the national and regional association discussed in the following section is reflected in the diversity of the churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network with the primary similarities being a conservative doctrinal stance, a high view of Scripture, and dedication to supporting mission endeavors domestically and internationally.

Founding of the Conservative Baptist Association of America and the Rocky Mountain Conservative Baptist Association

In the early part of the 20th century, the neoliberalism that had taken root in northeastern colleges and seminaries began to affect the Northern Baptist Convention (Now the American Baptist Convention). This created a rift within the Northern Baptists centered on what fundamentalists held as core doctrines, namely the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture and the Virgin Birth. Bruce Shelley describes the context of this rift:

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Protestants were embroiled in a bitter theological controversy. The protagonists were the “liberals” or “modernists,” who sought to adjust their inherited faith to the new intellectual climate, and the “fundamentalists,” who insisted that the old ways of stating the faith must be preserved unchanged. The roots of Conservative Baptist history run back to this doctrinal struggle.³⁷

The doctrinal struggle was often centered on the beliefs and teachings of missionaries. One missionary, while being interviewed by the Northern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, denied the deity of Christ, along with “other distinctive Christian truths.” He was affirmed to continue

³⁶ Venture Church Network holds a soft-complementarian view of women in leadership; however, VCN also recognizes there are biblical arguments on both sides of this discussion. Therefore, churches that have positions differing from VCN’s are not prohibited from VCN membership. While the Rocky Mountain Church Network has several churches that hold an egalitarian stance, there are none that have a female senior pastor.

³⁷ Bruce Shelley, *A History of Conservative Baptists* (Wheaton, IL: Conservative Baptist Press, 1971), 5.

as a missionary by a nine to four vote.³⁸ While the “fundamentalists” within the Northern Baptists were opposed to supporting missionaries who did not hold to orthodox Christian beliefs, the Northern Baptist Convention refused to amend its method for distributing support for missionaries, requiring churches to give to a missions fund that then was disbursed among missionaries.

The “fundamentalists” created a mission society in December 1943 called the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society. Churches that had struggled with supporting missionaries through the Northern Baptist Foreign Mission Society pledged to stop giving to the Convention and instead support missionaries individually. Through a series of meetings, conventions, and votes, the churches that supported missionaries through the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society acknowledged that they no longer had as much in common with the Northern Baptist Convention as they had with each other. This recognition led to the formation of the Conservative Baptist Association in February 1947.

The Conservative Baptist Association was based on a firm conviction of what the founders did not want in an association. After struggling with a centralized denominational structure, the founders created an association that was a loose affiliation of churches organized around a passion for mission activity. As much of the conflict with the Northern Baptists was based on mandatory support for a denomination, they rejected the notion of a unified budget for the Conservative Baptist Association. Instead, the Conservative Baptist Association was created as an association of churches that did not require any support from individual churches; rather,

³⁸ Ibid., 6.

churches could choose to give or not.³⁹ The Rocky Mountain Conservative Baptist Association was created with the same convictions and organization.⁴⁰

These factors have impacted the culture and context of churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Of the 50 churches in the network, 25 do not support the ministry of the regional association financially. This has two underlying factors. First, the Conservative Baptist Association and, by extension, the Rocky Mountain Conservative Baptist Association, was founded more on a premise of what the “fundamentalists” were against rather than what they were for. This attitude is often reflected in Conservative Baptist congregations today, leading to disunity due to not having a clear picture of what they support. Second, the Association was founded on a premise of fierce autonomy as a means of safeguarding against the events that led to the formation of the Conservative Baptist Association. This has led to issues contemporarily as congregations and congregants often reject any attempt to give guidance. The attitude of knowing what one is against more than what one is for combined with a fierce autonomy has created an atmosphere in which ideological differences can be elevated to the point that they create disunity in congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

Conservative Baptist Association of America Name Change

The Conservative Baptist Association of America changed its name in 2020.⁴¹ This name change reflects a shift in culture. When the association of churches was formed in 1947, the word “conservative” in a denominational or congregational setting described a theological position. However, in the current cultural context, the word “conservative” connotes a political or cultural

³⁹ Conservative Baptist Association of America, “Constitution of CBAmerica,” 2019, 4.

⁴⁰ Rocky Mountain Church Network, “The Bylaws of the Rocky Mountain Church Network,” 2011, 2.

⁴¹ “CBA-Name-Change.Pdf,” accessed June 29, 2022, <http://venturechurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CBA-Name-Change.pdf>.

position. Understanding this, the national board of the Conservative Baptist Association of America voted to change the name of the association to Venture Church Network. This name is intended to communicate a bold, forward-looking mindset in the association and its churches. This is reflected in Venture Church Network's mission statement: "Helping every church take bold next steps."⁴²

Problem Presented

The problem is churches within the Rocky Mountain Church Network are negatively affected by political and cultural tensions creating disunity. This is a time of increasing polarization of political and cultural ideologies. Reactions to contested elections and controversial cultural events have created an atmosphere in which familial, social, and professional structures are strained as viewpoints are valued more than relationships. While the impact of this atmosphere is clearly seen, the solutions often are not.⁴³ Evangelical churches are not exempt from this caustic atmosphere, particularly in the Rocky Mountain region, which contains an amalgam of cultures encompassing rural agricultural communities and large metropolitan areas, politically liberal communities and politically conservative communities, and culturally progressive viewpoints and culturally traditional viewpoints. Often, these disparate views are expressed in local congregations as individuals coming from the various backgrounds found in the Rocky Mountains worship together. As these individuals express their viewpoints and opinion, sometimes vitriolically, the resulting disunity impacts pastors negatively. A recent Barna survey revealed that 38% of pastors have recently considered leaving ministry altogether,

⁴² "CBA-Name-Change.Pdf."

⁴³ Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2018), 92.

with many identifying the stress caused by politically and ideologically driven disunity as the motivating factor.⁴⁴

When foundational ideologies supplant biblical identity, disunity is the result. While congregants may view disunity as an indicator of unhealthiness within a church, greater damage is done to the gospel witness of the church, hindering it from fulfilling the Great Commission. Though pastors may seek to address conflicts that arise due to differing views, this approach does not solve the issue as they are attempting to resolve symptomatic issues rather than root causes. Unless pastors and church leaders are given the tools to address foundational ideologies, which are often the result of a lifetime of the influence of culture and context, disunity will continue.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research project is to give church leaders a biblical and missional response to the ideologically driven disunity in congregations affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Two factors may have a role in creating the atmosphere of disunity in evangelical churches in the Rocky Mountain region. First, every individual has been deeply impacted by the culture and context in which they live. When one does not realize this, the result is an expression of religion that is more cultural than biblical.⁴⁵ Cultural and political identification supplant identification with Christ, making unity in Christ much more difficult. Second, pastors may be the cause of disunity if they do not realize the impact of their culture and

⁴⁴ Kate Shellnutt, "The Pastors Aren't All Right: 38% Consider Leaving Ministry," News & Reporting, accessed January 15, 2022, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/november/pastor-burnout-pandemic-barna-consider-leaving-ministry.html>.

⁴⁵ Mark Labberton, ed., *Still Evangelical? Insiders Reconsider Political, Social, and Theological Meaning* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018), 6.

context on their conception of religion and spirituality. As the leader of a congregation, the pastor can create the very atmosphere of disunity that has resulted in pastoral stress and early resignation.

Creating a multifaceted response based on a biblical understanding of unity and the importance of Jesus' mission for his church will address both factors. First, congregants who have confused political and cultural ideologies with biblical spirituality will be reminded of the importance of unity, the centrality of the gospel, and the mission to which they have been called. Second, pastors who have been the cause of disunity will be refocused on leading their congregations in the corporate mission that brings unity. This project's strategy equips pastors to respond to ideologically driven disunity in their congregations. This strategy will focus on combating the influence of foundational ideologies with teaching and preaching topics focused on communicating biblical principles of the believer's identity in Christ, leading a congregation in a corporate repentance and prayer event, encouraging cross-ideological dialogue, and the importance of missional activities in fostering biblical unity. These strategic steps will be presented at three regional one-day events in the Rocky Mountains, one each in Denver, CO, Sheridan, WY, and Salt Lake City, UT; these locations were chosen as they serve as regional hubs within the Rocky Mountain region. Church leaders will be surveyed prior to the event and following the event to gauge their perceived readiness to address ideologically driven disunity in their congregations. The same church leaders will be surveyed two months following the event to determine the level of implementation and the resulting impact on congregational unity.

Basic Assumptions

In creating this action research project, the researcher starts with several basic assumptions. First, the researcher assumes congregations and their leadership do not desire

disunity, but rather desire unity. Second, the researcher assumes church leadership will answer truthfully as to the level of unity within their congregations. Third, the researcher assumes church leadership will have the ability to give an accurate assessment of the level of unity within their congregation. Fourth, the researcher assumes church leadership will be willing to implement suggested practices to overcome ideologically driven disunity.

Definitions

This study identifies and addresses the ideological causes of disunity in Rocky Mountain Church Network churches in the Rocky Mountain region, specifically in the states of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah. As many of these causes find their roots in how ideas are expressed, terms in this project should be precisely defined.

Ideology. An individual belief or system of beliefs that one holds strongly enough that his or her actions or attitudes are impacted. Tutu writes, “In every sphere of life, human beings exercise power and authority which bring meaning to the way we live or do things.”⁴⁶ While sometimes unidentified, everyone has a set of ideologies.

Finite game. This term, coined by Simon Sinek, describes an effort that is well defined. Sinek writes, “Finite games are played by known players. They have fixed rules. And there is an agreed-upon objective that, when reached, ends the game.”⁴⁷ Ideological discussions and disputes are often approached as a finite game, with the formation of sides, the use of debate, and clear winners and losers.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Osei-Acheampong Desmond Tutu, “Biblical Perspective on Christians’ Participation in Politics,” *World Wide Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development* 3, no. 9 (2017): 165.

⁴⁷ Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2019), 3.

⁴⁸ Also see the definition for Zero-sum game.

Infinite game. Also coined by Sinek, an infinite game is much less definable. Sinek writes, “Infinite games, in contrast, are played by known and unknown players. There are no exact or agreed-upon rules. Infinite games have infinite time horizons. And because there is no finish line, no practical end to the game, there is no such thing as ‘winning’ and infinite game. In an infinite game, the primary objective is to keep playing, to perpetuate the game.”⁴⁹ While ideological discussions primarily fall into the category of a finite game, kingdom-minded ministry is much more defined as an infinite game.

Foundational. The nature of an ideology that affects all other aspects of one’s viewpoints. The influence of foundational ideologies is often unrecognized. While evangelical believers typically assert that their beliefs, actions, and attitudes are derived solely from Scripture, their understanding of Scripture is sometimes dictated more by foundational ideologies than by sound hermeneutical practices. Labberton writes, “Opposing views expose that underneath ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ lie basic instincts in our mental and social frames related to who and what actually matters.”⁵⁰

Unity. Believers should be able to accept one another and move forward in mission together regardless of background, ideologies, or differences. Philippians describes this as “being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil. 2:2, English Standard Version). Believers experience unity not because they have identical ideologies, but through their common bond in Christ and their desire to fulfill the mission of the church. Cleveland writes, “We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to care deeply about and pursue other followers of Christ, including the ones that we do not instinctively

⁴⁹ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 3.

⁵⁰ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 5.

value or like. We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to allow our identity as members of the body of Christ to trump all other identities.”⁵¹

Disunity. The tension that is experienced when a group of believers does not have unity. This state negatively impacts church leadership and the ability of a body of believers to fulfill the mission of the church. Stetzer notes, “Whenever we allow our political identity to shape the way we engage the world and others, we invariably close off outside sources that we do not consider part of our team. It is an ‘us versus them’ mentality that can spiral out of control.”⁵²

Mission. The mission of the church is the reason for its existence. A church does not have the right to choose its mission as Jesus gave the church its mission in the passage commonly known as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). Succinctly, the mission of the church is to make disciples. However, the phrase “make disciples” is often mischaracterized by viewing it through the lens of functional ideologies rather than Jesus’ intent. Malphurs writes, “Jesus expects his entire church (not simply a few passionate disciple makers) to move people along a maturity or disciple-making continuum from prebirth (unbelief) to the new birth (belief) and then to maturity.”⁵³

Zero-sum game. The belief that for one to succeed, another must fail. This perception has the potential to cause disunity in that it encourages the diminishing of others to increase one’s standing. Brueggemann writes, “Our usual response to such divisions, locally or in larger judicatories, is to win, to control offices and budgets and programs in ways that lead to tacit excommunication of those who think otherwise. The capacity to be so right as to impose unity-

⁵¹ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), Loc. 1299. Kindle.

⁵² Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 18.

⁵³ Aubrey Malphurs, *Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), Loc. 260. Kindle.

cum-excommunication arises from a heavy moral conviction that can be held together by a piety in which the only unity than can be entertained is a unity of like minds.”⁵⁴

Limitations

The researcher faces several limitations in implementing this action research project. As the Rocky Mountain Church Network is a rather loose association of churches, the Regional Executive Director (the position held by the researcher) has no authority or jurisdiction over churches in the network; congregations are entirely autonomous. As such, any participation on the part of church leadership will be entirely voluntary. While the researcher may offer one-day events on giving a biblical and missional response to disunity driven by ideology, church leadership may or may not choose to participate.

Another limitation is the fact that in some congregations experiencing disunity, the ideology of the leadership of the church is the cause. In this case, the leadership of that congregation may decline to participate as they would believe that there is not an issue to address.

A third limitation is the potential schedule for the one-day events. If the best possible time to present the one-day events is the early autumn, a conflict will arise with hunting season, which greatly impacts church schedules and ministry in the Rocky Mountain region. If the one-day events are presented in the fall, attendance may be decreased.

A fourth limitation is the geography of the Rocky Mountain region. The states of Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah have a combined area of 434,038 mi². While the one-

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann and Louis Stulman, *Truth and Hope: Essays for a Perilous Age*, first edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 140.

day events will be presented in three regional hubs, there may be congregations for which the distance to the event is too great for their leadership to attend.

Delimitations

The research will be focused only on churches within the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Other evangelical churches within the Rocky Mountain region may experience ideologically driven disunity. However, as the researcher is the Regional Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Church Network, he has chosen to restrict the research to churches within his purview.

While there are 48 churches distributed across the 434,038 mi² that comprise the Rocky Mountain region, the one-day events will only be presented in three locations. These locations are strategic in their geographic locations and accessibility.

This project will focus on disunity caused by political ideologies, which are evident in churches and culture at large. This project will not focus on other ideologies that often create disunity in congregations, such as schooling choice, musical styles, church polity, or theological issues.

Thesis Statement

If church leaders have a multifaceted biblical and missional response to disunity caused by cultural and political ideologies, their congregations will display greater unity. Jesus said the unity of his followers would reveal the truth of who he is (cf. John 17:20–21). In this, Jesus revealed the importance of unity among believers. This thought is repeated throughout the New Testament. As evangelical churches in the Rocky Mountain region often do not display biblical unity, this central characteristic requires greater prominence in teaching, preaching, and

communication. The New Testament gives several bases for unity: identity in Christ, the expression of the Trinity, and fulfillment of Jesus' mission. Through identifying the cause of disunity, calling believers who have replaced biblical spirituality with ideology to repentance, focusing on scriptural teaching on the believer's new identity, and fostering missional activity, congregations can rediscover healthy unity. This unity will mitigate the negative impact on pastors that has caused many to consider leaving the ministry.

This is a crucial undertaking tied directly to the gospel witness and effectiveness of a local congregation. In addition, as local congregations come together in the context of the Rocky Mountain Church Network, greater effectiveness in local congregations will lead to greater effectiveness in the association of churches. As the Rocky Mountain region has experienced tremendous growth over the past two decades and will continue to grow, especially regarding the number of children present in families in the region, there is a great need for effective, gospel-oriented churches. Helping churches focus on the mission of Jesus for his church instead of political and cultural ideologies will foster greater kingdom growth in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Much has been written concerning the tensions of differing political and cultural ideologies in current American society, particularly in the past five years as elections have seemingly become more contentious and cultural divides more apparent. While much has been written concerning these tensions in the culture at large, less has been written that specifically addresses political and cultural tensions causing disunity in evangelical congregations. Reviewing the literature on disunity without and within congregations reveals common themes and gaps in current thought on addressing politically and culturally driven disunity that hinders congregations in fulfilling their mission.

Literature Review

The Pervasive Nature of Ideologies

The foundational theme found in contemporary literature on the disunity in culture and the church is the pervasive nature of ideologies. Each individual, whether he or she realizes it or not, has an underlying ideology that permeates every aspect of thought, belief, and interaction. Mark Labberton writes, “We are never context-free. Context sets our life’s terms and possibilities; it is the frame that defines, supports, and contradicts our values and actions.”¹ This underlying contextualized ideology is often unrecognized, with an individual’s behaviors and interactions merely being the outworking of a larger set of influences.² The underlying ideologies

¹ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 13.

² Irwyn L. Ince, *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2020), 131.

are unrecognized in the church because religion and culture have similar definitions. This leads to an environment in which the expression of ideological views is lauded as an expression of spirituality, rather than one in which believers seek to have ideological views that are informed by spirituality.³ Christina Cleveland writes

Religion and culture are easily confused because they seem to work in very similar ways; definitions of religion and culture are eerily similar. Psychology textbook authors typically define culture as “a system of enduring meanings, beliefs, values, assumptions, institutions, and practices shared by a large group of people and transmitted from one generation to another.” Compare that with sociologist Emile Durkheim’s classic definition of religion: a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which united into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Durkheim’s definition of religion is basically a definition of culture that focuses on the sacred.⁴

The fact that religion and culture are easily confused is exacerbated by the nature of the human mind, which seeks clarity amid confusion and a group amid individuals. Jonathan Haidt contends that humans’ desire for clarity, which he refers to as “the righteous mind,” is the natural state of an individual, which then affects the aspects of behavior and interactions that are visible to others.⁵ Jonathan Leeman concurs, writing, “Just as our natures are religious, being designed to worship, so our natures are political, being designed to establish a social order.”⁶ Whether referred to as the righteous mind or human nature, the foundational ideologies are what drive individuals to try to create order and meaning.⁷ When two individuals with differing ideologies

³ Alberta, “How Politics Poisoned the Evangelical Church.”

⁴ Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), Loc. 1902, Kindle.

⁵ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, 1st ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), Loc. 79, Kindle.

⁶ Jonathan Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age*. (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020), 25.

⁷ Tutu, “Biblical Perspective on Christians’ Participation in Politics,” 165.

attempt to create order and meaning in ways that are antithetical to one another, disunity arises as both individuals may claim to be morally and spiritually superior, when in actuality they are simply viewing the same situation through differing ideological lenses. Haidt refers to the writings of James Madison in *The Federalist Papers* elucidating humanity's tendency to divide into "factions" that then become inflamed with "mutual animosity."⁸

The unrecognized foundational ideologies and their resulting expressed behaviors and interactions are at the core of disunity.⁹ The strength of foundational ideologies cannot be overstated. Haidt writes, "Individuals see confirmation of their grand narrative everywhere, and it's difficult—perhaps impossible—to convince them that they are wrong if you argue with them from outside their matrix."¹⁰ The strength of underlying ideologies has led to division in the church for centuries; the current state of disunity is not a new phenomenon. Greg Stanton writes, "After the Apostolic Fathers there is considerable evidence of disunity among Christians."¹¹ While believers may echo sentiments of unity seen in the New Testament, their foundational ideologies often prevent them from experiencing unity.¹² The disunity seen in the current context is a continuation of previous conflict; however, the inclination toward disunity has grown through the influence of social media and increased polarization.¹³ Haidt writes extensively on the impact of social media on the current polarized environment, including tracing much of the incivility seen on social media platforms to Facebook's "Share" and Twitter's "Retweet"

⁸ Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid."

⁹ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, Loc. 87, Kindle.

¹⁰ Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," 365.

¹¹ Greg R. Stanton, *Unity and Disunity in Greek and Christian Thought under the Roman Peace*, Studies and Texts in Antiquity and Christianity 125 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 185.

¹² Stanton, *Unity and Disunity in Greek and Christian*, 40.

¹³ Allen Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 153.

functions. These seemingly innocuous tools allowed users to both affirm and spread virulent posts to their own followers, dramatically increasing the level of disunity online.¹⁴

Foundational ideologies are difficult to overcome as they often are supported by biblical arguments developed through eisegesis. This is an expression of the confluence of culture and religion that enables a sense of spirituality and morality to otherwise immoral or amoral standards.¹⁵ For example, the intersection of conservative Christianity and traditional American standards may be more influenced by foundational ideologies than by Scripture. Leeman writes, “I am concerned that we sometimes let principles of Americanism determine the way we read Scripture, rather than letting Scripture determine how we evaluate principles of Americanism.”¹⁶ An ideology that drives the interpretation of Scripture rather than being shaped by the interpretation of Scripture results in intractable positions that cause disunity.¹⁷

The Conflict of Ideological Views

Foundational ideological views have the potential to lead to conflict and disunity. These views are developed through culture and context, then are expressed through behaviors and interactions. When foundational ideological views are expressed strongly, conflict arises regardless of stated goals of unity. Allen Hilton notes, “In one of his first post-election columns in November of 2016, New York Times columnist Charles Blow said of the rural-urban divide, ‘We’re living in two diverging Americas at odds and at battle.’”¹⁸ This happens when an individual regards his or her position, rooted in a foundational ideological viewpoint, to skew his

¹⁴ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Leeman, *How the Nations Rage*, 11.

¹⁷ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 23.

¹⁸ Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*, 13.

or her perspective of others.¹⁹ This leads one to view those who hold different viewpoints as opponents to be defeated. Several authors note the “zero-sum game” nature of the current ideologically driven disunity. Walter Brueggemann observes that ideology creates an environment in which people with differing views cannot simultaneously obtain that which they desire. He writes,

If YHWH does not act to vindicate the psalmist, moreover, the adversaries are sure to gloat even more: Do not let them say to themselves, “Aha, we have our heart’s desire.” Do not let them say, “We have swallowed you up.” Ps. 35:25 (au. Emph.) ‘Our heart’s desire’ is a translation of “our nephesh.” That is, as the nephesh of the psalmist may be addressed by the saving God in verse 3, and as the nephesh of the psalmist may praise YHWH in verse 9, so the victory of the adversary will give the adversary greater nephesh, surely at the expense of the nephesh of the psalmist. In the dispute, the matter of more or less nephesh is presented as a zero-sum game, more nephesh for the adversary, less nephesh for the psalmist.²⁰

This understanding is present in politics,²¹ communities,²² and churches.²³

Like the zero-sum game nature of ideologically driven disunity is Simon Sinek’s concept of a finite versus an infinite game. Sinek describes a finite game as one in which sides or teams are clearly defined, as well as the objective of the game.²⁴ On the other hand, an infinite game has varying players, no exact rules, and no definable, tangible objective.²⁵ Rather than being defined by rules and objectives, an infinite game is defined by five characteristics. These are five characteristics are:

- Advance a just cause

¹⁹ Hilton, Loc. 60, Kindle.

²⁰ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 32.

²¹ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 63.

²² Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 12.

²³ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 140.

²⁴ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

- Build trusting teams
- Study your worthy rivals
- Prepare for existential flexibility
- Demonstrate the courage to lead²⁶

While not all of Sinek's five characteristics have a clear correlation to ministry endeavors, the principles are closely aligned enough to give clarity as to how to address ideologically driven disunity. Failing to understand the distinction between a finite and an infinite game causes pastors and church leaders to unintentionally increase disunity while attempting to address it. Sinek notes, "When we play with a finite mindset in an infinite game, the odds increase that we will find ourselves in a quagmire, racing through the will and resources we need to keep playing."²⁷ Ideologically driven disunity is often the result of approaching spiritual endeavors, such as guarding the unity of the church, as a finite game with winners and losers rather than as an infinite game with a greater purpose than being proven right.²⁸

Foundational ideologies foster an attitude that is dismissive of those who hold differing views, leading to a near-inability to have a change of perspective. Ed Stetzer writes, "Outrage has no time for dialogue, and it won't be distracted by nuance or even truth."²⁹ This attitude brings a willingness to cause or create disunity on the grounds of upholding foundational ideologies rather than seeking unity through understanding. Leeman writes, "When a liberal guest lecturer at the University of Notre Dame was asked if she could find common ground with conservatives on race and gender, she answered, 'You cannot bring these two worlds together.

²⁶ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, xv.

You must be oppositional. You must fight. For me, it’s a line in the sand.”³⁰ Stetzer notes that individuals will “create their own reality” by disregarding information and conversation.³¹

In the current cultural context, increasing polarization is worsening the conflict of ideological views.³² Stetzer cites a LifeWay Research study that showed “[o]f evangelicals with an opinion, 82 percent believe that since the 2016 presidential election, groups within the Christian church have become increasingly polarized on issues of politics.”³³ While the LifeWay Research study revealed increasing polarization in the church, Cleveland identifies increasing polarization in politics.³⁴ Polarization has increased as individuals create caricatures of others who hold differing ideologies,³⁵ caused by the desire for affirmation of foundational ideologies.³⁶ This is a reflection of the zero-sum nature of ideological conflicts.

The Desired Distinction Between Church and Culture

As noted previously, Jesus emphasized the importance of unity among his followers. Throughout the New Testament, the centrality of unity to the mission and life of the church is oft repeated. The church should appear different than the world, particularly in the area of unity. Stanley Hauerwas writes,

What matters, therefore, is the reality of the interdependence that gives visibility to our catholicity. The form—that is the institutional arrangement—that expresses our interdependence is valuable but secondary. What is crucial

³⁰ Leeman, *How the Nations Rage*, 3.

³¹ Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 22.

³² Allen C Guelzo, “Nuanced Patriotism,” *First Things* 284 (June 2018): 14.

³³ Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 5.

³⁴ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, Loc. 906, Kindle.

³⁵ Mark Silk, “American Exceptionalism and Political Religion in Republican Politics Today,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 10, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 38.

³⁶ Shane Akerman, “Classical Trinitarian Theology and the Idolatry of Nationalism: The Doctrine of the Trinity as a Critique of Political Theology,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, The Claremont Graduate University, 2020), 226, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (2407577642).

is the effectiveness of how the gospel is lived out so that the gift and grace of God are apparent by the very fact that such a people exist.³⁷

Having unity among those with differing foundational ideologies allows the church to be an agent for positive change.³⁸ The church can accomplish this when it places the same value on unity that the New Testament does, which is non-existent in the world.³⁹

Unfortunately, the church often does not have the desired distinction from culture, becoming more concerned with winning ideological battles than winning people to Christ⁴⁰ and often attempting to win those battles in a manner that is inconsistent with the gospel.⁴¹ Believers sometimes allow conflict over unnecessary matters. Several authors observe this. Simone Chambers and Peter Nosco note, “What may look like small differences often proved as intractable as disagreement over obviously core issues.”⁴² John Compton notes the propensity of believers to make political decisions based not on Scripture, but rather on “self-interest or ingrained prejudice.”⁴³ Stetzer writes, “Several studies show that religious identity has little bearing on the ethical or theological views or behaviors of those who self-identify as Christians.”⁴⁴

³⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2013), 117.

³⁸ Timothy Keller and John Inazu, *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a World of Difference* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2020), 184.

³⁹ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 87.

⁴⁰ Andy Stanley, *Not in It to Win It: Why Choosing Sides Sidelines the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴² Simone Chambers and Peter Nosco, *Dissent on Core Beliefs: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 109.

⁴³ John W. Compton, *The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors* (New York, NY: Oxford university press, 2020), 4.

⁴⁴ Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 64.

This is not a recent development; the Reformers allowed ideological differences to hinder the unity that distinguishes the church from culture.⁴⁵ More recently, the cultural battles of the 1970s and 1980s created an environment in which winning cultural battles became a major priority for evangelical culture. While the church saw success in some arenas, the result was a shift in focus that impacts the church currently. Alberta writes, “Short-lived victories, however, came at a long-term cost. Evangelical leaders set something in motion decades ago that pastors today can no longer control.”⁴⁶

Disunity in the church has resulted in a reduced ability to fulfill the church’s mission to make disciples through sharing the gospel. This happens because the church does not display the unity that Jesus said would distinguish it from culture and identify who he was. It also shifts the focus from sharing the gospel with those who need salvation to winning a zero-sum game ideological argument.⁴⁷ Brueggemann notes, “The outcome, I suggest, is at best an anemic capacity to respond to the gospel for the sake of the world.”⁴⁸ This has a devastating effect on the gospel witness of the church.⁴⁹ A believer’s foundational ideological view may be that culture opposes the church because it is comprised of followers of Jesus; however, this is not the case. Labberton makes this point based on a shift in the perception of the word “evangelical.” He writes, “Evangelical had morphed from an identity grounded in gospel terms to a movement defined by ‘culture wars’ and partisan political activism. In mass media and the broader cultural

⁴⁵ Tutu, “Biblical Perspective on Christians’ Participation in Politics,” 167.

⁴⁶ Alberta, “How Politics Poisoned the Evangelical Church.”

⁴⁷ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 12.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 16.

⁴⁹ Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 110.

landscape, evangelicals were known far more for the ballots they cast than for the beliefs they held.”⁵⁰

Rediscovering Unity

Due to foundational ideologies, unity in the church does not come naturally; rather, it must be intentionally pursued. Cleveland writes,

We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to care deeply about and pursue other followers of Christ, including the ones that we don’t instinctively value or like. We need to adopt the belief that to be a follower of Christ means to allow our identity as members of the body of Christ to trump all other identities.⁵¹

While rediscovering unity may be difficult, it can happen through focusing on three areas: the Trinity, the gospel, and the mission of the church.

The Trinity

The relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can be a template for unity among believers. Nicholas Norman-Krause writes, “Both schools of Augustinians turn to the sociality of the divine Trinity for a pattern of harmonious unity-in-difference that can serve as a template for imagining creaturely relations amidst difference.”⁵² The way a believer accepts other believers who may have differing foundational ideologies has a two-fold result. First, the believer reflects the image of God.⁵³ Second, the believer is more prepared to share the gospel

⁵⁰ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 49.

⁵¹ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, Loc. 1299, Kindle.

⁵² Nicholas J. Norman-Krause, “Political Theology and the Conflicts of Democracy,” *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., Ann Arbor, Baylor University, 2021), 148, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (2572572525).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 149.

with those outside the church, reflecting the act of God adopting him or her and bringing transformation through the gospel.⁵⁴

The Gospel

Unity can be intentionally pursued through the gospel, both the truth of God’s Word and the new identity that comes through receiving it. Focusing on God’s Word enables believers to overcome foundational ideologies and develop meaningful relationships with other believers who may have differing foundational ideologies. Irwyn Ince writes, “One of the common threads I found throughout my research of diverse churches was...people were willing to overlook or work through the difficulties of being in a diverse church if that church was committed to the Bible as its central authority.”⁵⁵ Stetzer points specifically to the gospel as he considers the role of Scripture in rediscovering unity.⁵⁶ This is because disunity is, in essence, a sin problem. The answer to sin is the gospel; unity is the evidence that the gospel works.⁵⁷ The way one treats those who hold different ideologies reveals the extent to which he or she has been transformed by the gospel.⁵⁸

The Mission of the Church

Unity can be rediscovered as believers join in fulfilling the mission that Jesus gave to the church—making disciples.⁵⁹ The apostle Paul is an important example of rediscovering unity in

⁵⁴ Akerman, “Classical Trinitarian Theology and the Idolatry of Nationalism: The Doctrine of the Trinity as a Critique of Political Theology,” 45.

⁵⁵ Ince, *The Beautiful Community*, 112.

⁵⁶ Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage*, 92.

⁵⁷ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 15.

⁵⁸ Stanley, *Not in It to Win It*, 82.

⁵⁹ Diana Spencer, “EXPLORATIONS AND RESPONSES: Possibly Solving Post- Reformation Disunity.,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 52, no. 4 (2017): 610.

mission. Amanda Kaminski writes, “The infuriating and invigorating strength of Paul’s entrepreneurial personality, his fears and failures, the fragmentation he experienced with James, Peter, Barnabas, and Antioch and then in Galatia and Corinth, show missiologists that the work of integrating and innovating new expressions of faith will include tension.”⁶⁰ As believers focus on the mission rather than on their differences, they will be able to rediscover unity.⁶¹ This is because as believers are engaged in mission, reaching people who are unlike them, “the church finds that there are different ways to worship Jesus.”⁶² Being on mission can not only help believers rediscover unity but rediscovering unity makes believers more effective at fulfilling the church’s mission.⁶³

The Role of the Pastor in Rediscovering Unity

As pastors are the spiritual leaders and shepherds of bodies of believers, they have an important role in helping a congregation rediscover unity. Pastors can foster unity through leadership efforts and preaching. Cleveland addresses the use of leadership efforts to rediscover unity by writing, “[A pastor can foster unity by] modifying the organizational purpose to include unity goals...and correcting structural inequities in the church/organization culture.”⁶⁴ These unity goals can be rooted in missional efforts. This is not an easy task, as the prevalent

⁶⁰ Amanda Avila Kaminski, “Conversion, Apostasy, or Hybridity? The Terrible, Troubled, Transformative Experience of Paul as Exemplar for Missiology in an Age of Multiplicity,” *Missiology* 50, no. 1 (January 2022): 93.

⁶¹ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, Loc. 2050, Kindle.

⁶² Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 111.

⁶³ Kaminski, “Conversion, Apostasy, or Hybridity? The Terrible, Troubled, Transformative Experience of Paul as Exemplar for Missiology in an Age of Multiplicity,” 92.

⁶⁴ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, Loc. 2410, Kindle.

foundational ideologies in those the pastor leads will tend to revert toward disunity instead of continuing forward in mission, causing distress for the pastor.⁶⁵

The pastor can also help a congregation rediscover unity through teaching and preaching the importance of unity. By focusing on biblical passages that highlight the importance of unity, passages that compare the unity of the Trinity with the desired unity of the church,⁶⁶ and passages that connect unity with the gospel and mission, pastors can guide congregations toward unity.⁶⁷ Preaching on unity should be transformational, not simply informational.⁶⁸ This topic should be included regularly in the teaching and preaching schedule, as the natural human inclination is to revert to acting per foundational ideologies.⁶⁹ Keller and Inazu write, “Pastors need to teach, apply, sing, and pray the gospel into hearts until these habits and traits grow.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

The effect of ideologically driven disunity on pastors is apparent. Brueggemann writes,

Almost every pastor with whom I speak says that the deepest problem faced in the day-to-day practice of ministry is a small-minded certitude among people who have faith tied up in a box that keeps faith safe and beyond penetration. . . . Such a practice of certitude presents a minefield for the pastor. A certitude that knows all the answers before the questions are posed is stultifying and saps the community of energy. Given the fact that the pastoral task is to assist and equip

⁶⁵ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 55.

⁶⁶ Christina McCully, “Conflict Resolution to Preserve Church Unity” (Newberg, OR, George Fox University, 2021), 1, Professional Dissertations DMin (434), <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/434>.

⁶⁷ Normand Lewis Cote, “A Preaching Strategy Toward Spirituality, Renewal, and Unity at the Cornerstone Seventh-Day Adventist Church” (Berrien Springs, MI, Andrews University, 2021), 48, Professional Dissertations DMin (742), <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dmin/742>.

⁶⁸ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 139.

⁶⁹ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, Loc. 2146, Kindle.

⁷⁰ Keller and Inazu, *Uncommon Ground*, 30.

the saints to process their lives toward the newness of God's rule, this environment for ministry is an almost unbearable milieu.⁷¹

Though the effect of disunity on pastors is apparent and drastic, there is a path to unity. The current literature, which focuses on the presence and cause of ideological driven disunity in culture and congregations, provides a foundation upon which to build the case for the need for a strategic solution. What is lacking in current literature is a strategic solution that pastors can use to guide their congregations in recognizing foundational ideologies and moving beyond them to healthy unity. In understanding the pervasive nature of ideologies, pastors can navigate conversations and recognize the root causes of disunity. Through navigating the conflict of ideological views, pastors can address the increasing polarization of contemporary culture. As congregations remember the call to find their identity in Christ rather than in ideologies, they will mitigate the negative effects of disunity on their gospel witness. By rediscovering unity through following the example of the Trinity, focusing on the gospel, and engaging in mission, congregations will then have reinvigorated interest in gospel and mission efforts. As pastors step more boldly into the role of the spiritual leader and shepherd of a congregation, the resulting unity will help churches fulfill Jesus' statement that "the world may know that you have sent me" (John 17:23, ESV).

Theological Foundations

The New Testament addresses ideologically driven disunity directly and indirectly. It addresses disunity directly in emphasizing the need for unity as a reflection of the relationships within the Trinity and as it corrects attitudes of disunity within local congregations. The New Testament addresses ideologically driven disunity indirectly as it focuses on the mission of Jesus

⁷¹ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 55.

for his church, primarily found within the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20. Ultimately, these two approaches are tied together as the unity of the church directly affects its ability to fulfill its mission. As the mission of the church is foundational to everything that it does and is, this section will begin with examining the Great Commission, move on to several passages addressing disunity in local congregations, and then conclude with Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17, in which he links the unity of believers with the affirmation of his mission and the fulfillment of the church’s mission.

Matthew 28:18–20

The church does not select its mission; Jesus commissioned it in Matthew 28:18–20:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

In these words, Jesus commissions his church to participate in a universal mission. The universality of the mission is seen in the oft repeated “all” in these verses. Grant Osborne notes, “The early church would certainly and correctly read the universal mission into [Matthew 28:18–20], and the epiphany aspects ‘fore and aft’ provide the encouragement and means of accomplishing the task.”⁷² This universality is rooted in the authority of Jesus. “The Risen Lord’s universal authority makes possible the universal mission.”⁷³ The universal nature of the Great Commission indicates that all believers are to be involved in the mission of the church. While

⁷² Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1156.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1157.

many would seek to shift the responsibility of fulfilling the Great Commission to the leadership and organization of a local church, Jesus' words leave no room for personal abdication.⁷⁴

The mission of the church is summed up in the Great Commission in two words, “make disciples” (Matt. 28:19, ESV). This is the central command of the Great Commission. While Matthean grammar allows for viewing “Go,” “baptizing,” and “teaching” with imperatival force,⁷⁵ the plain understanding of the text is that there is a singular imperative. Osborne writes, “Still, the main verb ‘make disciples’ dominates, and all are aspects of that central part of the commission.”⁷⁶ Going, baptizing, and teaching are aspects of making disciples; each plays a role in fulfilling the mission of the church.⁷⁷ As believers go, they are interacting with those who need Christ who may be outside of their normal sphere of influence. The act of baptism indicates that there are nonbelievers who are coming to Christ and becoming obedient to Him. This obedience is rooted in the act of teaching, the implied learning, and all that Jesus commanded the church. A church that is focused on the Great Commission will participate in both outreach and inreach. Osborne writes, “The discipleship of v. 19a is defined as ethical obedience; outreach (evangelism) must be balanced by inreach (teaching and living the Word).”⁷⁸

The chronological position of the Great Commission shows its centrality to the missional activity of the church. Paul Borthwick writes, “Jesus gave the Great Commission during the forty

⁷⁴ Derek Jackson, “Creating Harmony Through a Unified Definition of Discipleship” (Lynchburg, VA, Liberty University, 2022), 72, Doctoral Dissertations and Projects (3541), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/3541>.

⁷⁵ Osborne and Arnold, *Matthew*, 1157.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Keisha Hodge, “Becoming Fitly Joined Together: Unifying the Church Body for Vision Manifestation” (Lynchburg, VA, Liberty University, 2021), 50, Doctoral Dissertations and Projects (2863), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2664>.

⁷⁸ Osborne and Arnold, *Matthew*, 1159.

days he walked the earth after his resurrection and before his ascension into heaven.”⁷⁹ The fact that Jesus used the short time before returning to the Father conveys the importance of the mission; while Jesus could have taught on any subject, He chose to teach on what His followers were to do as they await His second advent. While Jesus commands the church to be involved in His mission of making disciples, He does not give this commission without promises and assurances. The Great Commission is rooted in the authority Jesus had been given by the Father. Borthwick points out the impact of Jesus’ claim when he writes, “When he says ‘authority,’ the disciples (who had seen his miracle-working powers already) immediately realized that Jesus has just demonstrated God’s authoritative power over death and indeed over the Roman government.”⁸⁰

The final way one sees the universal nature of the Great Commission is in Jesus’ closing words, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20, ESV). The church is not sent on its mission alone; Jesus himself promises to be with the church as it continues the mission Jesus gave to it. The presence of Jesus energizes the church to be involved in his mission and empowers it to fulfill his mission. “Matthew concludes with a blend of ecclesiology and eschatology—the church is God’s chosen messenger during the interim before the consummation and as such is promised the continuous presence of the authoritative One in executing that task.”⁸¹

Given the Great Commission’s chronological position in the post-resurrection, pre-ascension period of Jesus’ ministry, it has great importance in any church’s understanding of

⁷⁹ Paul Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸¹ Osborne and Arnold, *Matthew*, 1160.

what Jesus calls it to accomplish. The Great Commission’s charge is singular in nature and universal in scope. All believers everywhere are called to make disciples of all nations. By understanding the gravity of the Great Commission and recognizing the universal scope of its call, believers and churches will be able to avoid ideologically driven disunity by focusing on what Jesus, the Head of the church, calls it to do rather than on the ideologies that have, at best, temporal importance.

1 Corinthians 1:10–13

Paul directly addresses disunity in the Corinthian church, writing

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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul (1 Cor. 1:10–13, ESV)?

The church in Corinth is well known for its struggles. As one reads through First and Second Corinthians, the picture of a divided, dysfunctional church emerges.⁸² Paul addresses divisions and factions at the beginning of 1 Corinthians as the primary problem in the church was the presence of divisions and factions. The word “divisions” in 1 Corinthians 1:10 does not necessarily carry a negative connotation; it can simply mean “difference of opinion.”⁸³ This may be the use of the word here, as Paul does not speak negatively of those whom the Corinthians were following. In 1 Corinthians 15:11, Paul says that he and Peter “proclaim the same gospel.”

⁸² Mark J Keown, ““Do Not Go Beyond What Is Written” (1 Cor 4:6),” *Stimulus* 22, no. 2 (July 2015): 45.

⁸³ F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 34.

In 1 Corinthians 16:12, Paul encourages Apollos to visit the Corinthians.⁸⁴ These two commendations lead Thomas Schreiner to conclude that the “divisions were entirely the fault of the Corinthians, and Paul did not find fault with the theology of Peter or with Apollos.”⁸⁵

Additionally, Paul articulates how varying people work together for God’s purposes, including those whom the Corinthians were following to the point of creating division in the body. F. W. Grosheide writes, “Paul does not want to banish all diversity from the church, as is clear from the following verses where such diversity is not opposed (cf. 3:6ff), but only an unbrotherly attitude.”⁸⁶

Hence, the problem Paul addresses in the Corinthian church was not that the Corinthians had differences of opinion; rather, Paul challenges the Corinthians’ disunity that had its root in allowing differences of opinion to divide them. While differences of opinion may be benign, “difference of opinion easily leads to sin and division, as was the case at Corinth.”⁸⁷ Paul addresses this directly and individually. The root of the division was in individuals deciding what was most important to them, rather than focusing on the mission Jesus had given to his church. “*Each one of you*’ indicates that everyone had chosen a position. The whole church was divided in that everyone had his own standpoint and condemned that of the other.”⁸⁸

Paul uses two approaches to remedy the disunity seen in the Corinthian church. First, he appeals to Jesus’ name. Schreiner writes, “The appeal is given *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, which reminds the readers that Paul’s words are not merely his private opinion, and that

⁸⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 63.

⁸⁵ Schreiner, 63.

⁸⁶ Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 34.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Paul's exhortations formulate the consequences of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection."⁸⁹ This appeal also has the purpose of reminding the Corinthians that Jesus is Lord of the church; as such, he is the focus and the giver of the mission. Second, Paul uses specific words to communicate his love for the Corinthians and model the love they should have for each other. "Twice in these verses Paul uses kinship language (*brothers and sisters*) to denote his affections and love for the Corinthians."⁹⁰

Paul's message to the Corinthian church gives one possible way in which to address ideologically driven disunity. Instead of allowing differences of opinion to divide the body of Christ, believers should allow for differences by focusing on the common bond they have through Jesus and the corporate standing they have through him.

1 Corinthians 3:3–6

Paul returns to addressing the division in the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 3:3–6:

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth (ESV).

In the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes the fleshliness of the Corinthians as he cannot write to them as spiritual people but must address them as people in the flesh (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3). "The Corinthians are unable to go deeper because of their worldliness, which is evidenced by their *jealousy and [strife]*."⁹¹

⁸⁹ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 61.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

These differences are notable for two reasons. First, the differences are not based on theology or doctrine but are based on human doctrine and reasoning. Grosheide writes, “Here again no mention is made of doctrinal differences. The sin of the Corinthians was jealousy and strife, which are also found side by side in Galatians 5:20, where the apostle writes about the works of the flesh.”⁹² Instead of doctrine, the disunity in Corinth was based on the non-acceptance of other believers who adhered to the teaching or ministry of a different teacher.

Second, the differences are caused not by spiritual understanding, but by “behaving only in a human way” (1 Cor. 3:3, ESV). Behaving spiritually would have brought unity that empowered the Corinthian church to fulfill the Great Commission. However, the Corinthians replaced spirituality with the partisanship of following specific teachers. Schreiner writes,

Such strife indicates that they were living at a merely human level instead of according to the Spirit. As noted in 1 Corinthians 1:11–12, the quarreling and jealousy centered on strife over Paul and Apollos. The Corinthians measured their spiritual wisdom by siding with Paul or Apollos or perhaps Peter as well. The Corinthians believed their partisanship reflected their spiritual perception, but Paul says that it points to the spiritual poverty; they are actually living on a human level instead of relying on the Holy Spirit.⁹³

While adherence to a particular teaching may have brought a sense of righteousness and spirituality, it actually brought self-righteousness and fleshliness that caused divisions in the church. Believing oneself to be right is not a replacement for true unity based on the mission of the church to make disciples. Misunderstanding this is at the heart of much of the ideologically driven disunity present in congregations today.

In discussing the church as God’s building in 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul seems to become distracted from the flow of his thinking and gives a sidebar concerning how one builds upon the

⁹² Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 80.

⁹³ Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 88.

foundation of Jesus Christ during his or her life. He then returns to the thoughts of God's building with a stern warning in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple” (ESV). Some wrongly correlate “God's temple” with 1 Corinthians 6:19, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God” (ESV)? This wrong correlation has led some to interpret 1 Corinthians 3:16–17 as describing suicide as an unforgivable sin. However, the connection is not to 1 Corinthians 6:19, but rather to 1 Corinthians 3:9. Instead of proclaiming God's judgment against those who commit suicide, Paul is proclaiming God's judgment against those who would destroy God's temple, that is the church, through disunity.

This passage reveals that allowing worldliness and fleshly impulses to determine one's spiritual activity and affections reduces relationships within a congregation to a zero-sum game. This results in an environment in which there are winners and losers, with no option for individuals who hold different ideologies to participate in fulfilling the Great Commission together. When one's focus is on ideologies rather than on the Great Commission's call to make disciples, ideologically driven disunity is the result.

James 4:1–2

James discusses disunity in a larger passage showing how “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (Jas. 4:4, ESV). After calling his readers to peace, James writes, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask” (Jas. 4:11–2, ESV). James contrasts spirituality and unity with worldliness and disunity. Allison Dale writes,

The subsequent rationale, which takes up the theme of jealousy from v. 2, also has two parts—a reminder of the hostility between God and “the world” (v.4), which should counter the behavior in vv. 2b-3, and spiritual condemnation of jealousy and promotion of humility (two quotations, vv. 5–6) which should counter the behavior of vv. 1–2a.⁹⁴

For James, the root of disunity is internal to the believer rather than external. He refers to the “passions...within you” (Jas. 4:1, ESV). Doug Moo describes James’ writing by noting, “James has suggested a connection between ‘envy and selfish ambition’ and ‘disorder’ (3:16). Now he specifies more clearly what he means by ‘disorder’ and portrays the way it is produced by jealousy and by other desires. That the internal dysfunctions should be dealt with rather than the external displays is seen as James “seems to be bothered more by the selfish spirit and bitterness of the quarrels than by the rights and wrongs of various viewpoints.”⁹⁵ These attitudes are expressed in the zero-sum game nature of many disputes leading to disunity in the church. The internal attitudes of “jealousy and selfish ambitions” (Jas. 3:16, ESV). create an atmosphere in which in order for one to “win,” another must “lose.” This is especially prevalent in ideologically driven disunity, as seen in this passage. “It is suggestive that James has used a word connoting political ‘factions’ (*eritheia*) in 3:14 and 16.”⁹⁶

John 17:20–23

In what is often referred to as the “High Priestly Prayer,” Jesus prayed to the Father on the night he was betrayed. Found in John 17, the High Priestly Prayer includes verses central to the discussion of the unity of the church, particularly regarding the correlation of unity and the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Jesus prayed,

⁹⁴ Dale C. Allison Jr., *James : A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), 593.

⁹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *James* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 176.

⁹⁶ Moo, 176.

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 be perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me (John 17:20–23, ESV).

Jesus begins this section of his prayer by praying for a new group of people. In the first section of John 17:1–5, Jesus prayed for himself. In the second section (John 17:6–19), Jesus prayed for his disciples. In this third section, Jesus prays for “those who will believe in me through (the disciples’ word). In this section, praying for future believers, much of the focus is on unity. “It encompasses the theme of the unity of the future believers among one another and in the Father as in the Son.”⁹⁷ The unity Jesus prays for in John 17 is not rooted in unanimity of thought. Instead, it is rooted in spiritual truth, namely the “unity of Jesus with the Father and of the believers in Jesus.”⁹⁸ This unity is achieved as individual believers set aside the jealousy and selfish ambition of James 3:16 and pursue a deeper relationship with the Father and the Son. Frederick Bruner writes, “The first way, according to this Fifth Petition, is for us individually, domestically, and corporately to seek our own spiritual lockage into Jesus and his Father in a way even minutely comparable to the lock the Father and the Son have on each other.”⁹⁹ True unity can only be achieved when believers focus on their relationship with the Father and the Son, rather than on earthly ideologies. Bruner continues, “By whatever legitimate means we can find, we will *first* seek a deep vertical connection with the Father and the Son, comparable to the

⁹⁷ Johannes Beutler and Francis J. Moloney, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Chicago, IL: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017), 331.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 968.

Father's and the Son's deep connection with each other, so that *then* we can find our ways into union with each other in common Christian life."¹⁰⁰

Notable in this discussion is the fact that Jesus directly ties the effectiveness of the mission of the church with the unity the church exhibits. Bruner writes, "The primal *divine union* encourages and enables the responsive *churchly union*, which then, in turn and finally, moves the world in the goal of the whole mission—into the *world's union* with the church and, so, with the divine Father and Son by faith in and knowledge of the Father's sending his Son for them."¹⁰¹

Jesus' prayer for unity is not primarily for the benefit of the disciples and the future church, although there are great benefits to participating in a body of believers that is experiencing unity. Rather, Jesus' prayer for unity has as its goal greater effectiveness at fulfilling the Great Commission. Johannes Beutler writes, "The unity of the believers is aimed not only at the preservation of the faith community but also has a missionary consequence."¹⁰² This Great Commission movement is reflected in Jesus' statement in John 17:18, "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

Jesus' prayer for unity is most instructive for pastors and church leaders seeking to address ideologically driven disunity. Jesus highlights the unity seen eternally in the relationships within the Trinity, then proclaims that believers should have the same type of unity with one another. Having this unity in a congregation affirms the mission of Jesus and empowers a congregation to fulfill the mission to which He calls it.

¹⁰⁰ Bruner, 968.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 975.

¹⁰² Beutler and Moloney, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 332.

Conclusion

Unity is addressed often in the New Testament by Jesus, Paul, and other writers. The frequency with which the New Testament addresses unity implies two things. First, it implies that unity is a central theme to the life of an individual believer and the mission of the church. Without unity, believers are unable to experience the fellowship and communion of the saints. Second, the frequency with which the New Testament addresses unity implies that the New Testament church experienced unity. Paul's correction of the Corinthian church is instructive here, as well as James' admonition. This reveals that the disunity experienced by congregations today is not a new phenomenon. However, the fact that disunity has been present in the church since its inception does not imply that disunity is an insurmountable obstacle. Through understanding the difference between doctrinal and ideological differences and focusing on the mission of the church given in the Great Commission, individual believers and, by extension, congregations will experience greater unity and mission fulfillment.

Theoretical Foundations

Ideologies are pervasive. Whether held consciously or not, everyone has an ideology that impacts their attitudes, actions, and beliefs. Collin Slowey writes, "The 19th-century philosopher Destutt de Tracy invented the word 'ideology' to describe the system of ideas he designed to transform France into a more rational, enlightened society. By this definition, an ideology is not a neutral worldview, but rather, an active intellectual framework tied to particular social and political ends."¹⁰³ As this active intellectual framework impacts attitudes, actions, and beliefs, the result is often disunity. While believers in a local congregation may express the same doctrinal

¹⁰³ Collin Slowey, "The Christian and Ideology," *Initiative on Faith & Public Life* (blog), September 2, 2020, <https://www.faithandpubliclife.com/the-christian-and-ideology>.

and missional standards, disunity is often still present. This is due to the influence of ideology on all areas of life. Labberton writes, “What divides evangelicals can be found underneath our theology, on the often-unrecognized mental and social frame on which our theology sits.”¹⁰⁴ As ideologies go unrecognized, their negative impact on relationships within families, communities, and the church can grow unabated. This happens as the standards of an ideology subtly replace the place of religion and spirituality in one’s life.¹⁰⁵

Ideologies can supplant religion and spirituality because they have many of the same characteristics. The English political theorist Maurice Cranston described the characteristics of ideologies.¹⁰⁶ They are comprehensive in that they seek to incorporate all the human experience. They are goal-oriented in that they often have an objective toward which adherents of the ideology strive. They require effort to maintain. They require a commitment to a cause. Finally, they are intellectual, driven more by reason than emotion. Slowey writes, “The first four of Cranston’s characteristics of ideology, when disconnected from the word itself, describe just as accurately the function of religious beliefs as they do that of political ones.”¹⁰⁷

Because ideologies can function much like spiritual or religious beliefs, they are often incorporated into the attitudes, actions, and beliefs of believers. Due to the divisive nature of ideologies,¹⁰⁸ when they are allowed to influence relationships within the church, the result is disunity. Slowey writes, “Adherents to opposing worldviews claim an inability to agree on so much as ‘basic facts’ and view each other with suspicion, even open hostility. Moreover,

¹⁰⁴ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 5.

¹⁰⁵ Slowey, “The Christian and Ideology.”

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Shadi Hamid, “America Without God,” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/america-politics-religion/618072/>.

members of the political left and right are held to an inflexible standard by their co-partisans, expected to toe the party line on every issue or else face punishment.”¹⁰⁹ This outcome is unfortunate for many reasons, the greatest of which may be that believers allow political ideologies to impact spiritual activities when “Political questions are not metaphysical; they are of this world and this world alone.”¹¹⁰

Since ideologies are easily confused with religious beliefs, the language used to communicate each are often confused. The era of social media has exacerbated the issue as religious leaders will sometimes use political terminology to communicate religious and spiritual messages and vice versa. For instance, while leading an evangelistic crusade in California, Rev. Franklin Graham tweeted:



Figure 3.1 Franklin Graham tweet

While Graham attempted to diffuse the political nature of his statement through naming Jesus Christ, the phrase “blue wall” is clearly a reference to the political leanings of the state of California, which is firmly liberal. The innuendo was not lost on those who replied to the tweet, with those holding the same ideological views as Graham declaring California’s need for the gospel, ostensibly due to the state’s politics, and those holding differing views decrying

¹⁰⁹ Slowey, “The Christian and Ideology.”

¹¹⁰ Hamid, “America Without God.”

Graham’s use of a political term to describe a spiritual endeavor and asking if Graham was equating being a Democrat with being “anti-Christ.”¹¹¹

One can see the same mindset from the other side of the political spectrum. Father Michael Pflieger is a Catholic priest known for his political rhetoric and activism. Pflieger tweeted:



Fr. Michael Pflieger
@MichaelPflieger

How does the First Lady have an Anti-Bullying platform and her husband uses the most powerful platform in the world to BULLY 16 year old Greta Thunberg...and Republicans, Trumpites and Evangelicals your Silence to evil makes you co-conspirators

6:09 AM · Dec 13, 2019 · Facebook

Figure 3.2 Michael Pflieger tweet

In this case, Pflieger makes no effort to differentiate between spiritual and political rhetoric, clearly equating Republicans and Evangelicals. Possibly due to the extreme nature of Pflieger’s ideological stances, the comments on his tweet were much more uniform in ideological position. However, they do reveal that Pflieger’s communication was much more political than spiritual, even though his Twitter profile plainly states that he is the senior pastor of the Faith Community of Saint Sabina in Chicago, IL.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Franklin Graham [@Franklin_Graham], “We’re Here in California to Pierce the Blue Wall–Not for Politics, but for Jesus Christ! #DecisionAmerica #SantaClara,” Tweet, *Twitter*, May 31, 2018, https://twitter.com/Franklin_Graham/status/1002233088892485632.

¹¹² Michael Pflieger [@MichaelPflieger], “How Does the First Lady Have an Anti-Bullying Platform and Her Husband Uses the Most Powerful Platform in the World to BULLY 16 Year Old Greta Thunberg...and

Reactionary Responses to Ideologically Driven Disunity

There are many ways in which a local congregation may react to the presence of ideologically driven disunity. Guillermo Hansen identifies four reactions, none of which are helpful. He writes, “The outcomes of ideologically driven disunity are diverse: from a fall into nostalgia, to the erection of heritage sites, to becoming a refuge, to being a recalcitrant embodiment of reaction.”¹¹³ A fifth reaction, finding a biblical and missional response to disunity driven by ideology, will be addressed as well as it provides the only possible way to find the unity Jesus desires for his church.

A Fall into Nostalgia

Ideologies are often based on the preference for times past. However, this preference can be skewed by perception or culture and context. The perception of the past is often clouded by the innate proclivity to remember occurrences that were beneficial and to forget occurrences that were painful. This leads one to remember the past more fondly than their experience of the present, which is the basis for the phrase, “the good old days,” which may or may not have been “good.” The perception of the past is clouded by culture and context in that one often assumes their experience was universal. For instance, many have fond feelings for the era of the 1950s and 1960s, proclaiming that life was simpler and easier then. However, an African American who lived in the South during that era may have a different recollection than a White individual who lived in Southern California. A third way a fall into nostalgia is problematic for experiencing biblical unity is that it inherently looks to the past, while the mission of the church

Republicans, Trumpites and Evangelicals Your Silence to Evil Makes You Co-Conspirators,” Tweet, *Twitter*, December 13, 2019, <https://twitter.com/MichaelPfleger/status/1205474864376750081>.

¹¹³ Guillermo Hansen, “The Networking of Differences That Makes a Difference: Theology and the Unity of the Church,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51, no. 1 (2012): 32.

continues to move forward into the future. The mission of the church is both ecclesiastical and eschatological, having to do with the life of the church and the future of the church as it fulfills its mission while awaiting Jesus' return. Gordon Zerbe writes, "Paul is also confounded, despite his visionary resilience, by unrealized eschatological hopes that relate precisely to what God's people are supposed to look like on the way to this cosmic goal."¹¹⁴

Erection of Heritage Sites

While this may not be as prevalent as the others, it does play a role in how the church reacts to disunity. The evangelical church is not known for erecting sites to which believers make a spiritual pilgrimage. However, some sites have been built to reinforce a worldview. While this may be done innocuously, the result can be the development of a litmus test to decide if one can have fellowship and unity with another believer. While the sites may have an important purpose, such as the Creation Museum pointing to God as the Creator, some believers become more animated about convincing others about the truth of creation rather than being animated about convincing others about the truth of the gospel. When this happens, the focus on the mission of the church becomes diluted; the result is a movement toward disunity.

Becoming a Refuge

As believers encounter ideologies that differ from their own, they may be tempted to withdraw and separate from the culture to guard their own ideology. While this may be unintentional, it reflects the fear of tension that can arise when differences in ideologies are present. However, "Difference is not division, but the provision for unity. Otherness is not a

¹¹⁴ Gordon Zerbe, "The One and the Many, the Part and the All: Unity and Diversity in the Messiah's Body Politic," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 11, no. 1 (2010): 23.

threat to unity, but a condition for it.”¹¹⁵ In seeking ideological purity, believers act contrary to the prayer of Jesus in John, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15, ESV). When congregations seek to address ideologically driven disunity by becoming a refuge from differing ideologies, they hinder their ability to fulfill Jesus’ mission for his church.

A Recalcitrant Embodiment of Reaction

The fourth inadequate response to ideologically driven disunity is to become focused on convincing others that one’s ideology is correct, rather than focusing on the gospel¹¹⁶. Christoph Stenschke asks several questions to help gauge the effectiveness of this approach:

How do conflicting national, ethnic, economic, and other differences—and the way in which they are discussed and in which we discuss them—relate to our prime allegiance to Christ and to the unity which he brought and called for? What is at stake when we side with positions in our societies and political discourses before reflecting on the light of the gospel? How do we and how should we as Christians engage in such issues, and with each other, in a way that does not breed suspicion and hurt people, but is characterized by respect and Christian love?¹¹⁷

Stenschke’s questions are instructive in that they place one’s focus where it should be. That is the loving expression of the gospel rather than on the underlying ideological framework that too often determines the direction of conversations and the depth and results of relationships.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Hansen, “The Networking of Differences That Makes a Difference: Theology and the Unity of the Church.,” 37.

¹¹⁶ Michael Jackson, “Recognizing and Overcoming the Problem of Individualism in a Local Church” (Lynchburg, VA, Liberty University, 2020), 67, Doctoral Dissertations and Projects (2664), <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/2664>.

¹¹⁷ Christoph Stenschke, “Editorial: Engaging Our Situation.,” *European Journal of Theology* 29, no. 1 (April 2020): 5.

¹¹⁸ Guichun Jun, *A Holistic Model of Handling Conflicts: Lessons from a Multicultural Urban Congregation in Britain* (1517 Media, 2020), 65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1v08zx4>.

A Biblical and Missional Response

In order to avoid ideologically driven disunity, one must subject his or her ideologies to the truth of Scripture rather than understanding and incorporating the truth of Scripture through the underlying framework of his or her ideologies. There are three ways in which this may be accomplished. First, believers must find their identity through Jesus and not through their ideological stances. Clay Stauffer writes, “Primary allegiance must return to Christ and not to a political party or figure...Christians must focus more on Jesus and less on partisan politics, especially partisanship cloaked in hero worship.”¹¹⁹ Second, believers must seek to fulfill Jesus’ mission for his church rather than primarily act as proponents for their ideology. Zerbe writes, “A crucial premise for any discussion of ecclesial unity and diversity in Paul’s thought must be his eschatological vision, his world-transformational hope. Paul’s mission is framed and energized by a vision of the imminent arrival of the universal reign of God, through the faithful agency of the Messiah.”¹²⁰ Truly understanding that Jesus called His church to make disciples rather than activists can motivate believers to embrace unity to fulfill the church’s mission.¹²¹ Third, believers must embrace the New Testament call to unity, setting aside ideological differences to walk in obedience to Scripture while displaying the unity that affirms Jesus’ mission and empowers the church’s mission.

¹¹⁹ Clay Stauffer, “When Polarization Hits the Pews,” Vanderbilt University, February 22, 2021, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/unity/2021/02/22/when-polarization-hits-the-pews/>.

¹²⁰ Zerbe, “The One and the Many, the Part and the All: Unity and Diversity in the Messiah’s Body Politic,” 22.

¹²¹ Donald William Cardinal Wuerl, “Christian Unity in the Age of Social Division: In Coming Together, the Faithful Can Change the World,” *The Priest* 73, no. 1 (January 2017): 13.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Churches are experiencing ideologically driven disunity, as shown by two recent studies. A July 2020 study by LifeWay revealed that disunity is prevalent, with 27% of pastors identifying “maintaining unity/conflict/complaints” as the largest challenge they face.¹ This was the most common concern given by the survey’s respondents. Additionally, an August 2020 study by Faithlife revealed that while 73% of church leaders indicated that their congregation’s leadership experience unity, only 9% of churches reported no divisiveness in their congregations.² As the problem of ideologically driven disunity is prevalent in churches and results in conflict, tension, and lack of mission fulfillment, this action research project addresses the problem to make churches more effective in kingdom work. This includes three phases: research, implementation, and follow-up. The research phase utilizes a survey of pastors and church leaders in the Rocky Mountain Church Network to discern the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity, along with several focus groups to allow pastors to communicate the issues they are facing qualitatively in addition to the quantitative input of the survey. The implementation phase will include three one-day presentations in geographic hubs in the Rocky Mountain Church Network to train pastors and church leaders to give a biblical and missional response to ideologically driven disunity. Finally, the follow-up phase will utilize a survey to

¹ Ryan Foley and Christian Post Reporter, “Church Unity a Top Concern for Protestant Pastors as Pandemic Lags on, Poll Shows,” The Christian Post, August 18, 2020, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/church-unity-a-top-concern-for-protestant-pastors-as-pandemic-lags-on-poll-shows.html>.

² “Faithlife Survey Shows Disunity Regarding Church COVID-19 Policies,” September 30, 2020, <https://churchtechtoday.com/faithlife-church-disunity/>.

ascertain whether participants in the study implemented the suggested activities and teachings and the resulting impact on the level of disunity in congregations.

Intervention Design

Project Participants

The participants in the study will primarily be pastors of churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network. However, in the case of a church experiencing a pastoral transition, an associate pastor or lay leader will be recruited as the representative from that congregation. The participants in the study will be recruited through personal emails and phone calls (see Appendices B and C) from the researcher, who serves as the Regional Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Church Network. For the purpose of the project, pastors and church leaders will not be separated into different study groups. However, pastors and church leaders will naturally be divided along geographic areas through the selection of three locations for the one-day presentations. This division will not have an impact on the project as the information given at the one-day events will be identical.

The researcher will provide potential participants with consent forms, either via hard-copy or electronic signature (see Appendix D). The researcher will utilize the online signature service PandaDoc³ to obtain electronic consent. These consent forms will contain disclaimers that the research, presentations, and strategies form part of the researcher's doctoral thesis project. The consent forms will also indicate that the researcher is executing the action research project with the permission of the Rocky Mountain Church Network Board of Directors.

³ <https://www.pandadoc.com/>.

Project Duration

The researcher will begin this action research project immediately upon approval by the IRB and his mentor. This is to ensure that the research, implementation, and follow-up phases are completed in a timely manner to allow adequate time for the evaluation of the results. As ideologically driven disunity often has its roots in the years-long, if not decades-long, creation of foundational ideologies that impact theological and cultural stances, the process of addressing ideologically driven disunity will take time. However, to ensure timely completion of this action research project, the following timeline will be adopted upon IRB and mentor approval:

Table 3.1 Project timeline

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Weeks 1–2 | Contact and invite representatives from all 55 congregations to participate in the study |
| Week 3 | Host two online focus groups |
| Week 4–6 | Completion of initial survey |
| Week 7 | Evaluation of initial survey responses |
| Weeks 8–9 | Host three one-day presentations |
| Weeks 10–16 | Church leaders implement teaching/preaching material and host corporate repentance gathering |
| Weeks 16–17 | Completion of the follow-up survey |
| Week 18–20 | Compilation of follow-up survey results and completion of the action research project |

The research phase of the intervention will consist of two components: online focus groups and an initial survey. Two groups of pastors and church leaders will be selected to participate in the online focus groups. The purpose of the online focus groups is to develop qualitative, narrative data concerning the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity. These focus groups will also allow the researcher to determine how participants have attempted to address ideologically driven disunity and the level of effectiveness of these attempts. The

online focus groups may inform portions of the initial survey.⁴ The purpose of the initial survey (see Appendix E) is to ascertain the presence, extent, and impact of ideologically driven disunity.⁵ The researcher will send an initial survey to the pastors and church leaders who indicate a desire to participate in the action research project when contacted via email or phone by the researcher. The initial survey will consist of a combination of two-answer questions and Likert scale components. The two-answer questions will enable the researcher to ascertain the presence of ideologically driven disunity and the percentage of congregations impacted. The Likert scale components will enable the researcher to quantify the extent to which congregations are affected by ideologically driven disunity.⁶

The researcher will utilize online surveys created in Google Forms that will automatically enter the collected data into Google Sheets. This will enable the researcher to collect and analyze data more efficiently than entering the data from each form individually and manually. This will also allow the researcher to utilize the formula functions of Google Sheets to evaluate the data in several ways. First, the data will reveal the presence and extent of ideologically driven disunity as reflected by the percentage of pastors and church leaders who indicate its presence in their congregations. Second, the data will show the impact of ideologically driven disunity through the average of Likert scale questions asking pastors and church leaders to rate the extent to which it has impacted their congregations.⁷ Third, the researcher will be able to ascertain any correlation between theological stances, preaching methods, and public communication of ideological

⁴ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 124.

⁵ Paul D. Leedy, Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, and Laura Ruth Johnson, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, Twelfth edition (New York, NY: Pearson, 2019), 153.

⁶ Leedy, Ormrod, and Johnson, 155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 308.

stances through in-person or social media interactions and the presence of ideologically driven disunity. Fourth, the researcher will look for correlation between the tenure of the pastor and the presence of ideologically driven disunity. The R Project⁸ will allow the researcher to create a scatter graph showing any correlation between tenure and disunity.

The researcher will also seek to understand if a congregation's fulfillment of the Great Commission has bearing on the presence of ideologically driven disunity. Questions regarding the number of professions of faith and baptisms performed in the 12 months prior to the initial survey will indicate a congregation's outward focus and evangelistic efforts. This will then be compared to responses regarding the impact of ideologically driven disunity.

The implementation phase will consist of two components: one-day events presented in three geographic hubs in the Rocky Mountain Church Network and the usage of suggested teaching/preaching materials and a corporate repentance gathering in each of the congregations whose pastor or church leaders are participating in the intervention. The one-day events will be presented in the following locations:

Table 3.2 One-day Presentation locations

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| First Baptist Church, Sheridan, WY | Sheridan, WY functions as the geographic hub for Northern WY and Southern MT. |
| Denver Seminary, Denver, CO | Most Rocky Mountain Church Network churches are in Colorado, with many of them located in the Denver Metro area. |
| Washington Heights Church, Ogden, UT | While there are only five churches currently aligned with the Rocky Mountain Church Network in Utah, the distance to Denver (the closest of the other hubs) would be prohibitive for attendance at a one-day presentation. |

⁸ <https://www.r-project.org/>.

The researcher will discuss the results of the initial survey and focus groups during the initial part of the one-day presentations. This section of the presentation will be, by nature, data-driven and will form the foundation for the subsequent portions of the presentation by describing the presence of disunity in congregations and the extent of the problem. This communication will also provide a sense of community for those involved in the one-day presentation as the near-universal nature of ideologically driven disunity will assure pastors and church leaders that they do not face a unique problem alone.

The subsequent portion of the one-day presentation will consist of communicating strategic themes to equip pastors and church leaders to address ideologically driven disunity in their congregations and introducing preaching/teaching topics to use to foster biblical and missional unity. The communication of the four strategic themes will be presented in two sessions, with each session concluding with a question-and-answer period followed by a break.

Strategic Themes

The one-day presentations will incorporate teaching on four strategic themes that will be necessary to address ideologically driven disunity through a multi-faceted approach. These themes are present in each facet of the approach and serve as foundations upon which one can build attitudes, conversations, and actions. The four strategic themes are the foundational nature of ideologies, energy follows attention, disunity is caused by fear, and communication for unity.

Foundational Ideologies

Everyone has an ideology. This ideology is formed through family history, life experience, cultural mores, and education.⁹ One's ideology impacts every aspect of one's life,

⁹ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 13.

including the way one views information, the way one views cultural issues, and the way one views others, both inside and outside the church. Ideology often becomes foundational, impacting even the way one views Scripture, discipleship, and Christian living. This results in an approach to life that is based on eisegesis, interpreting Scripture through one's ideology as opposed to forming one's ideology based on Scripture.¹⁰ This is the reason two individuals can start with the same passage of Scripture and arrive at two different conclusions;¹¹ they often have arrived at their conclusions based not on sound practices of hermeneutics, but rather due to the influence of foundational ideologies.¹² When one does not recognize the influence of foundational ideologies, the result is a belief that one is right while others are wrong, which has the potential to lead to ideologically driven disunity.

Energy Follows Attention

One does not spend effort and energy randomly. That which is the focus of one's attention receives the largest portion of the finite amount of energy he or she has. If his or her focus is on a political or cultural ideology that is where his or her energy will be used. When applied to a congregational setting, the result is an environment in which disunity arises as individuals are focused on, and therefore, spending energy on ideologies rather than on the biblical mission of the church.¹³ As everyone has an ideology, the number of focuses is limited only by the number of people involved in the church.

¹⁰ Ionut Untea, "Catholicity Without Leviathan: Stanley Hauerwas's Perspective on the Church as an Alternative Political Community," *Politics and Religion* 12, no. 1 (March 2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755048318000500>.

¹¹ John Fea, "Using the Past to 'Save' Our Nation: The Debate over Christian America," *OAH Magazine of History* 27, no. 1 (2013): 7.

¹² Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 23.

¹³ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 12.

To lead a congregation to address ideologically driven disunity, a pastor or church leader must address the principle that energy follows attention in two manners. First, the focus of congregants must be addressed. Many people exacerbate the problems caused by foundational ideologies through the media they consume on a daily, if not hourly, basis. As individualized news reporting and commentary is readily available through digital and social media, people often focus on media that confirms their already deeply held ideologies. This leads to a greater focus on their ideological views, which results in greater energy spent defending those views, increasing ideologically driven disunity in a congregation.

Second, a pastor or church leader must address the principle that energy follows attention in their own life and ministry. Pastors and church leaders must wrestle with whether their own foundational ideologies are in part to blame for the presence of ideologically driven disunity in their congregation.¹⁴ The principle that energy follows attention also impacts disunity in the church in that it is impossible to have unity unless one seeks unity.¹⁵ Unity does not come naturally, as each individual's foundational ideology tends to create tension with those who hold differing viewpoints.

Disunity Is Caused by Fear

On the surface, it appears that ideologically driven disunity is caused by the tension of differing ideological views. However, the tension of differing ideological views is symptomatic of a deeper issue: fear. The fear that causes ideologically driven disunity is based on two factors. First, people often fear loss. They naturally look to the past with nostalgia, believing that things were better in a previous time. This leads them to believe that they are part of a group that no

¹⁴ Dale A Meyer, "Pedagogy for a Politicized Church," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 6.

¹⁵ Joel D Biermann, "Truth and Unity," *Concordia Journal* 46, no. 4 (2020): 12.

longer has the power or influence that it once had.¹⁶ For example, some decry the fact that the United States is not as “Christian” as it once was.¹⁷ However, this is often not based on a perceived lack of spirituality, but rather on a change in the expression of certain ideological and cultural expressions. The fear of loss can also be based not on what has been lost, but on what may be lost. As the percentage of the population of the United States that identifies as Christian is projected to fall below 50% by 2060,¹⁸ some believers may be fearful of the resulting cultural change. This can result in even greater attention to ideology with its resulting expenditure of energy.

Second, one often fears the “other side” winning. Due to the zero-sum game nature of ideological discussions and viewpoints, the only result of one side winning is the other side losing. Utilizing Sinek’s distinction between a finite game and an infinite game will be valuable here. Church leaders often seek to address ideologically driven disunity as though it were a finite game, with known rules, players, and objectives. However, attempting to address ideologically driven disunity in this manner often exacerbates the problem as conversations turn into debates and seeking unity devolves into the zero-sum game exercise of determining who is right and who is wrong. This only serves to entrench sides into greater opposition. Unless one views ideology through a third viewpoint, a biblical and missional viewpoint, the impetus to avoid losing

¹⁶ Adam Gabbatt, “Losing Their Religion: Why US Churches Are on the Decline,” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2023, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/22/us-churches-closing-religion-covid-christianity>.

¹⁷ Fea, “Using the Past to ‘Save’ Our Nation: The Debate over Christian America,” 8.

¹⁸ “U.S. Christians Projected to Fall below 50% of Population If Recent Trends Continue,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), accessed April 26, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/pf_2022-09-13_religious-projections_00-01/.

through pursuing winning will only result in greater disunity. This reflects Sinek's infinite game, with the ultimate objective not being proven right, but enabling the continuation of the "game."¹⁹

Communication for Unity

Pastors and church leaders are often uncertain as to how to address ideologically driven disunity. While they may realize the impact that disunity has on a congregation and its ability to fulfill the mission to which God calls it, pastors and church leaders also realize the possibility of strong reaction due to the foundation nature of ideologies.²⁰ Navigating this tension is possible if communication is based on two principles that address the root cause of disunity, fear. First, the answer to fear is not courage. A common perception is that to address foundational ideologies, one must "take a stand." This leads to pastors and church leaders communicating forcefully and directly. However, this often serves only to inflame ideological responses.²¹ In writing about action research principles, Ernest Stringer writes, "When researchers engage in political processes based on polarities of interest, they are likely to engage in conflictual interactions that generate antagonism."²² The result of addressing disunity through confrontational means is only more confrontation.

Second, the answer to fear is love, because "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18, ESV). Love is first expressed for God. As he is the one who redeems his people, he deserves to be the focus of one's love. As energy follows attention, one will use his or her energy to worship and glorify God instead of winning ideological discussions.

¹⁹ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 3.

²⁰ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 55.

²¹ Chambers and Nosco, *Dissent on Core Beliefs: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, 121.

²² Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 196.

Love is then expressed for others, because “if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11, ESV). God’s love for his people should result in love for others. As energy follows attention, love for others will result in placing energy in serving other people instead of promoting foundational ideologies. Ince writes, “The church is a living sign of the union of all things because he supernaturally reconciles us to God and to one another by the power of his Spirit. Refusing to pursue this reconciliation is akin to resisting the heart of God. It means failing the calling we have been given as the people of God.”²³ The greatest result of this would be the fulfillment of the Great Commission as God’s people focus their love on God and others, with the resulting energy being used in the proper manner.

Preaching/Teaching Materials

The preaching and teaching materials will provide three weeks of lesson and sermon outlines. These outlines will focus on the biblical teaching concerning the mission of the church, Jesus’ prayer for unity and its connection to the mission of the church, and the impact of disunity on congregations. The teaching outlines will encompass the topics detailed in table 3.3.

While the researcher will encourage participants to use the teaching/preaching outlines in the primary weekend gatherings of the churches participating in the intervention, he realizes that some churches and pastors may have rigid preaching schedules. In this case, the material may be taught in a Sunday School class or small groups. In either case, the materials and outlines will address the problem of ideologically driven disunity from a biblical and missional perspective. Additionally, the researcher will provide each participant with a three-week devotional, consisting of 15 studies that align with the teaching and preaching materials (see Appendix F).

²³ Ince, *The Beautiful Community*, 10.

Each participant will utilize the devotional studies to deepen their understanding of a biblical and missional response to ideologically driven disunity. Each day's study consists of a devotion created by the researcher based on his literature review and theological foundations work. Each day's study also contains three questions for reflection tying the participant's understanding of the devotional study and his or her personal experiences with either ideologically driven disunity or attempts to address ideologically driven disunity. The researcher will empower the pastor or church leader to determine whether the devotional studies will be utilized in the congregational setting or only by the pastor or church leader.

Table 3.3 Teaching/preaching topics

| Topic | Text | Teaching Points |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| The mission of the church | Matthew 28:18–20 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mission of the church is to make disciples • The importance of the Great Commission is seen in that Jesus gave it between the resurrection and ascension • The mission is universal in scope—all believers are called to participate • When believers participate in Jesus’ mission for his church, ideological differences diminish |
| Jesus’ prayer for unity | John 17:20–23 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jesus specifically prays for unity • Jesus ties the unity of the Trinity with the fulfillment of his mission • Unity among believers affirms Jesus’ identity • Unity among believers affirms Jesus’ mission and empowers the church’s mission |
| Impact of disunity on congregations | 1 Corinthians 1:10–13 1 Corinthians 3:3–6 James 4:1–2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disunity is caused by adherence to ideologies rather than foundational theology • Disunity hinders the missional efforts of the church • Disunity causes distress among believers • Disunity brings the judgment of God |

Corporate Repentance

The corporate repentance component will consist of gathering the congregation in a setting outside of the primary weekend gathering²⁴, briefly recounting the preaching and teaching points and creating an environment of corporate prayer and repentance. These gatherings will be focused on recognizing ideologically driven disunity, acknowledging personal responsibility in fostering disunity, and committing to focusing on Jesus' mission for the church rather than on foundational ideologies. The gatherings will follow the model of repentance found in 2 Kings 22–23, the account of the discovery of the Law in the temple, Josiah's acknowledgment of not observing the Law and subsequent grieving and calling the people of God to focus on God's purposes. Attendees at the gatherings will be encouraged to sign a covenant in which they promise to endeavor to focus on the kingdom of God rather than on the kingdoms of the world. Signing this covenant will affirm their commitment to seek unity through a biblical understanding of ideologies, identity, and mission (see Appendix H). As the Rocky Mountain Church Network consists of 55 churches across a large geographic area, the Regional Executive Director will not be able to lead each of these gatherings; therefore, each pastor or church leader participating in the intervention will be trained as to how to lead the corporate repentance gathering and given the materials necessary to guide the congregation.

The follow-up phase of the intervention will consist of a post-intervention survey given to participants (see Appendix L). This survey will contain two-answer questions designed to ascertain the percentage of churches that have experienced increased unity through a biblical and missional response. The survey will also contain Likert scale components to discover the extent

²⁴ The purpose of holding a corporate repentance gathering outside of the primary weekend gathering is to protect the primary weekend gathering and its place in fulfilling the mission of the church. Holding a corporate repentance gathering in the presence of visitors and possible unbelievers may place an obstacle in one's journey in finding and following Jesus.

to which unity increased as well as any resulting impact on the congregation's ability to fulfill Jesus' mission for the church found in the Great Commission.

Like he did in the research phase, the researcher will utilize Google Forms and Google Sheets to collect and analyze data during the follow-up phase of the intervention. This will allow the researcher to determine the efficacy of the various methods and strategies presented during the one-day presentations and utilized during the implementation phase. The researcher will use percentages of two-answer questions to determine which methods and strategies were used. He will also use averages of Likert scale questions to determine the efficacy of those methods and strategies.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

The researcher modified the intervention for three reasons. First, the qualitative research components²⁵ required modification to accommodate project participants' schedules and availability. The researcher also added an interview and a teaching component based on comments that arose during personal conversations with two different project participants. Second, the site of the Denver Metro area One-Day Presentation was changed from Denver Seminary to Good News Community Church in Broomfield, CO, to reduce travel time for participants driving from northern Colorado while maintaining proximity for project participants in the south Denver Metro area and southern Colorado. Third, some technological components were modified as the researcher found more effective and affordable alternatives to those initially chosen. These modifications, however, did not affect the teaching components of the One-day Presentations; the structure, conclusions, and strategic themes remained the same.

²⁵ These components include the online interviews and focus group.

All components of the action research project were designed to maintain as much anonymity as possible. Both the Initial Survey and the Follow-up Survey were anonymous, with the only identifying information being a timestamp for each submission. This provided for anonymity; however, this also precluded the researcher from asking follow-up questions. The information from the interviews and focus group was anonymized, with each participant being assigned a number from one to eight for the project. While participation in the focus group was anonymous, the participants in the focus group knew each other. The researcher communicated the importance of confidentiality and reminded the participants prior to recording the focus group that he could not control what focus group participants communicated after the conclusion of the group.

Interview with Two Non-RMCN Pastors

The researcher had a conversation on July 7, 2022, with two pastors (Pastor One and Pastor Two) who lead congregations located in the Rocky Mountain region but are not affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network. In this conversation, the two pastors and the researcher conveyed their experiences leading congregations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The two pastors each believed their congregations had maintained unity during a time when many others experienced ideologically driven disunity. Believing these pastors' experiences may augment the quantitative and qualitative research of this project, the researcher asked the two pastors if they would share their experiences in a recorded online interview. Both pastors agreed. Upon receiving IRB approval (see IRB Approval Letter), the researcher sent the two pastors a Consent Form (see Appendix D) via the electronic signature platform Pandadoc.²⁶

²⁶ <https://www.pandadoc.com>.

After both consent forms were completed, the researcher scheduled an online interview for November 2, 2022. The interview was recorded using the online video podcasting service riverside.fm.²⁷ The researcher chose this platform for its reliability in recording and ability to generate a usable transcript. During the interview, the researcher used the focus group questions found in Appendix M. He also took handwritten notes during the interview and typed notes and recollections shortly after completing the interview. Conclusions from this interview are located in Chapter 4.

Initial Survey

To gauge the presence and impact of IDD in congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network, the researcher designed a survey (see Appendix E) using a variety of question types. The survey included questions that were based on information and conclusions that arose from the interview with two non-RMCN pastors. This interview revealed several factors that may influence the presence and impact of IDD and caused the researcher to consider others as well. Therefore, the researcher formulated questions that gauged these factors. These included the tenure of the senior pastor, the age of the congregation, the political leanings of the senior pastor, church leadership, congregation, and ministry context, the preaching style of the senior pastor, the senior pastor's soteriology, and the number of professions of faith and baptisms during the past 12 months. In all, the Initial Survey contained 39 questions covering the presence and impact of IDD, characteristics of the senior pastor, nature of the congregation, and activities of the senior pastor and church leadership.

²⁷ <https://www.riverside.fm>.

The Survey was designed using Google Forms.²⁸ Responses were collected anonymously, with the only identifying feature being a timestamp to keep individual responses distinct from one another. The responses were imported directly into Google Sheets,²⁹ creating a spreadsheet the researcher could use to analyze the collected data. This analysis included creating charts and graphs the researcher used to arrive at conclusions concerning the presence and impact of IDD and communicate those conclusions during the One-day Presentations. The spreadsheet also allowed the researcher to use Pearson's Correlation Coefficient to determine any correlation between two sets of variables, specifically correlation between different sets of variables and the impact of IDD during the past 12 months, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 election season and its aftermath. This analysis and subsequent conclusions are in Chapter 4.

The researcher emailed the project participants, inviting them to complete the Initial Survey. These emails included links to both the Initial Survey directly and to the project website. Twenty project participants completed the Initial Survey by the deadline of March 17, 2023, with the remaining two completing it shortly thereafter. This allowed the researcher to compile and analyze the data from the Initial Survey for communication at the One-Day Presentations in April 2023.

Project Website

To facilitate communication and the sharing of resources, the researcher created a website containing links to various project resources (see Appendix N).³⁰ Project participants

²⁸ <https://forms.google.com>.

²⁹ <https://sheets.google.com>.

³⁰ <https://www.rmcn.org/e-pluribus-una-ecclesia>.

were able to locate the project resources easily.³¹ Additionally, the researcher did not have to include project resources in individual emails; rather, he was able to direct participants to a singular location to obtain the resources necessary to complete the project.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment began with personal, casual conversations as the researcher awaited IRB approval. Once he received IRB approval, the researcher utilized the material in the Recruitment Scripts (see Appendices B and C) to recruit project participants via email, phone calls, and personal conversations. Out of 48 churches in RMCN, 19 senior pastors and 3 church leaders agreed to participate in the action research project, representing 46% of congregations in RMCN. Each participant completed a Consent Form (see Appendix D) prior to having access to any other project requirement or resource.

Three-week Devotional

In order for project participants to have a greater understanding of the mission of the church found in the Great Commission and its implications for unity, the researcher created a three-week devotional (see Appendix F) each project participant was required to complete. The devotional was created in Microsoft Word and converted to a PDF document. Following this process, the researcher used Kindle Create to publish an eBook that was then distributed through Kindle Direct Publishing. This allowed the researcher to give access to the devotional through three different means: direct download from the project website, eBook in Kindle format, and hard copy ordered through Amazon.com.

³¹ Resources available on the project website included the Consent Form, Initial and Follow-up Surveys, three-week devotional, unity covenant, information concerning the One-Day Presentations, sermon series, and links to the One-Day Presentation livestream and YouTube recordings.

Focus Group

The researcher emailed the project participants on March 21, 2023, to solicit involvement in an online focus group. While several participants expressed unavailability, three (Pastor Three, Pastor Four, and Pastor Five) immediately agreed to be a part of the focus group. Through additional emails and personal conversations, the researcher recruited two additional focus group participants (Pastor Six and Pastor Seven). The focus group took place on March 27, 2023, with four participants as one had an unexpected scheduling conflict. However, this participant (Pastor Seven) agreed to be recorded for an individual interview later. The focus group was recorded on Zoom, with the researcher taking handwritten notes and generating a transcript of the recording. Focus group questions are in Appendix M, and the conclusions are in Chapter 4.

Interview with Pastor Seven

As Pastor Seven had agreed to participate in the focus group, but was unable to do so, the researcher asked if he would participate in an interview. Pastor Seven consented. The interview took place on April 13, 2023, via Zoom. During the interview, the researcher used the focus group questions and took handwritten notes. Following the interview, the researcher generated a transcript of the interview and edited it for clarity. Conclusions from this interview are in Chapter 4.

Interview with Pastor Eight

During a casual conversation, Pastor Eight, a senior pastor of an RMCN church and project participant, conveyed the result of the church's leadership decision to use a transgendered person's preferred pronouns. As much of the response seemed to be ideological in nature, the researcher asked if Pastor Eight would discuss the process church leadership used to arrive at the

decision to use preferred pronouns and the consequences of that decision. Pastor Eight consented. The interview took place on April 25, 2023, via Zoom. The researcher took handwritten notes and generated a transcript of the interview. Conclusions from this interview are in Chapter 4.

One-day Presentations

Project participants were required to attend, either in person or virtually, three one-day presentations communicating the results of the initial survey and detailing a strategy for addressing IDD in a local congregation. These presentations were given at three different RMCN churches. To not place the additional burden of recruiting technical help on the host churches, the researcher created a self-contained live stream system using Switcher Studio.³² This software allowed the use of two iPhones as video cameras, with an iPad functioning as a video mixer. This system also imported the researcher's MacBook Air display, so the visual presentation was used as a third video input. By using this system, the researcher was able to create an engaging online experience while giving the presentation.

The first presentation was given at Intermountain Baptist Church in Taylorsville, UT, on April 13, 2023, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Ten pastors and congregants attended in person, with one individual watching the live stream. The second presentation was given at Good News Community Church in Broomfield, CO on April 18, 2023, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The in-person attendance at this presentation was 15, with six watching the live stream. The third presentation was given at First Baptist Church in Sheridan, WY, on April 20, 2023, from 10:00

³² <https://www.switcherstudio.com>.

a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Twelve individuals attended the presentation in person, while 6 watched the live stream.

The One-day Presentations contained the strategy for addressing IDD the researcher developed through the literature review, theological foundations, theoretical foundations, qualitative research, and quantitative research. The strategy addressed the points in Table 3.4.

The researcher used typed notes (see Appendix I) and a Keynote presentation (see Appendix J) to communicate the conclusions of the Initial Survey and qualitative research during the first portion of the One-day Presentations. During the second portion, the researcher communicated a strategy for addressing IDD. Those in attendance received a Presentation Handout (see Appendix K) containing the results of the Initial Survey and detailing the strategy for addressing ideologically driven disunity. While containing some different material, the Presentation Handout followed the structure of the researcher's speaking notes. Throughout the presentations, the researcher paused to allow time for questions from those in attendance. The researcher also responded to several questions posed through the chat function of the YouTube livestream.

Table 3.4 Strategy for addressing ideologically driven disunity³³

| | |
|--|---|
| The Importance of Addressing IDD | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must begin with self-reflection • Recognize that many attempts to address IDD have exacerbated the situation • Importance of the Great Commission |
| Finding the Third Voice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many do not recognize their own ideology • The foundational nature of ideologies and the ease with which they are confused with spirituality • Focusing on Jesus' command in the Great Commission rather than debating ideology |
| Understanding the Cause of Disunity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disunity is caused by fear • Fear of loss leads to a zero-sum game • The antidote to fear is love, not courage |
| IDD and <i>The Infinite Game</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advance a just cause • Build trusting teams • Study your worthy rivals • Prepare for existential flexibility • Demonstrate the courage to lead³⁴ |
| Knowing When to Move On | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastors and church leaders have a finite amount of energy and must choose where to spend it • Look for areas of agreement • Give an invitation to join the mission • Let them leave |

Unity Covenant

The researcher developed a Unity Covenant (see Appendix H) to be used in a congregational setting, preferably outside the regular weekend gathering of a church. While the

³³ The strategy for addressing IDD is given in detail in the Presentation Handout located in Appendix K.

³⁴ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 24.

researcher provided this resource for project participants, implementation of the Unity Covenant was not a requirement of the project. The Follow-up Survey gauged the likelihood project participants would use the Unity Covenant in their local congregation. Project participants were asked to give an explanation if they were unlikely to use the Unity covenant. Conclusions regarding the likelihood participants would use the Unity Covenant are given in Chapter 4.

Sermon Series

The researcher created a three-week sermon series correlating to the topics of the three-week devotional (see Appendix G). While the researcher provided this resource to project participants, they were not required to use the sermon series to participate in the action research project. The Follow-up Survey contained questions to determine the likelihood participants would use the sermon series in their congregation. If a participant was unlikely to use the sermon series, they were asked to give an explanation. Conclusions regarding the use of the sermon series are in Chapter 4.

Follow-up Survey

Two weeks following the final One-day Presentation in Sheridan, WY, project participants received an email inviting them to complete the Follow-up Survey (see Appendix L). This email gave the purpose of the Follow-up Survey, prompts to prepare participants for completing the survey, a link to the project website (which included a link to the Follow-up Survey), and a deadline by which the survey should be completed. Although several participants missed the deadline of May 15, 2023, the researcher obtained all responses by May 30, 2023. This required several email requests, initially to the participants as a group, then through emailing individual participants.

The researcher created the Follow-up Survey in Google Forms and imported participants' responses into Google Sheets to facilitate the analyzation of the data generated. The Follow-up Survey contained 16 questions designed to gauge the effectiveness of the project overall, the effectiveness of individual components of the strategy to address IDD, and the likelihood participants would utilize various components. Conclusions from the Follow-up Survey are in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The Rocky Mountain Church Network is a diverse collection of churches located in a large geographic area; however, initial discussions confirm the near universal impact of ideologically driven disunity. It appears that churches experience ideologically driven disunity regardless of size, style, culture, or location. While the disunity churches experience was exacerbated by the racial tension, political discord, and global pandemic of 2020, churches have been experiencing ideologically driven disunity for decades, if not longer.¹ As the crises of 2020 accelerated the increase of disunity, pastors and church leaders increasingly felt the impact of disunity on their congregations.

While ideologically driven disunity has deep roots in many congregations and the duration of the action research project is relatively short, the researcher anticipates two significant outcomes. First, the researcher expects pastors and church leaders to feel more confident in their ability to address ideologically driven disunity. This will happen as they recognize that they are not alone in facing this issue in their congregation; multiple surveys have shown the pervasive nature of disunity and the researcher believes the initial survey of the intervention will confirm the same for churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Additionally, the online focus groups will establish and strengthen relationships among pastors and church leaders who desire to address ideologically driven disunity through a biblical and missional response. Second, the researcher anticipates a perceived decrease in ideologically

¹ Timothy D. Padgett, *Dual Citizens: Politics and Evangelicalism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 15.

driven disunity through the adjusted focus that comes through the preaching/teaching materials and the response to the corporate repentance events. While any increase or decrease in unity will be difficult to quantify, the perception of the pastors and church leaders will be utilized to determine the efficacy of the intervention. The researcher hopes that the relatively short duration of the intervention will serve as the foundation upon which congregations will build further biblical and missional focus in order that the attention to the Great Commission will result in greater energy expended on fulfilling it rather than on winning ideological battles.

Qualitative Research

Interview with Two Non-RMCN Pastors

These two pastors of non-RMCN churches lead dissimilar congregations. Pastor One is the senior pastor of a charismatic congregation that averages 260 in their primary weekend gatherings. He leads a staff of full-time and part-time ministry professionals. Pastor Two is the senior pastor of a liturgical congregation averaging 80 in their lone weekend gathering. As the church is relatively small, Pastor Two is the only paid ministry staff person. While their congregations may be dissimilar Pastor One and Pastor Two are both theologically and ideologically conservative. Both Pastor One and Pastor Two reported having a current average attendance than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, both reported negligible IDD during the pandemic.

There were five key takeaways from the interview concerning the way these churches were avoided ideologically driven disunity. First, the tenure of the pastor may have played a role. Both pastors have been involved in their churches from their inception, or nearly so. Pastor One came to his congregation 2 years after it was planted and has been at the church for 26 years. Pastor Two planted his congregation in 2015. Both concluded that their long tenures (in Pastor

Two's case relative to the age of the church) allowed them to guide the culture of the church more effectively during the pandemic. This leads the researcher to believe that the tenure of the senior pastor may play a role in the presence or absence of ideologically driven disunity.

Second, Pastor Two related a strong focus on others. He said his common refrain was, "I don't want to kill Morris," an 80-year-old attender. Pastor Two was able to communicate in a way that helped the congregation place the care of and concern for others before their own preferences. He constantly reminded the congregation of the Great Commandment's call to love God and love others.

Third, both pastors said they focused on Scripture by repeating passages such as Romans 13 and Titus 3. A fourth takeaway, which is similar, was Pastor One's focus on the mission of the church. He said he constantly reinforced the call of the church to make disciples. In doing these, both pastors communicated more effectively than other pastors who had less success by focusing on Scripture and mission. This may be due to falling into debating what was right or wrong (the finite game) rather than attempting to persuade people of the importance of what the church should do (the infinite game).

Finally, Pastor Two emphasized the importance of confidence in communication. His experience was that if he wavered in what he was calling the church to do, cracks in leadership would begin to form. If he remained resolute, the leadership and church followed his leadership more willingly. This is reminiscent of the importance of courage in the infinite game.

Focus Group with Pastors Three, Four, Five, and Six

These pastors represent a cross-section of RMCN. Pastor Three leads a congregation with a weekly attendance of 1900 in a suburban area. Pastor Four serves a congregation of 800 in a suburban area. Pastor Five's congregation reaches 60 people in a suburban area. Pastor Six leads

a congregation of 30 in a rural area. Pastor Seven planned on participating in the focus group but was unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict. However, he participated in an individual interview covering the same content later. After discussion regarding the presence and impact of IDD, the researcher asked each participant what they have done that helped address ideologically driven disunity and what they would do differently if given the chance. The conversation affirmed concepts of the strategy developed by the researcher, particularly as related to the Infinite Game.

When asked what was most effective at reducing the impact of IDD in his congregation, Pastor Three identified having a clear mission and vision that guide decisions made by church leadership. This also gives the church leadership a tool for clarifying their position on various ideological issues without exacerbating IDD through debate. Instead, the church's leadership invites those who disagree with them to partner with them in advancing the mission and vision of the church. In this way, Pastor Three's church leadership exemplify the Infinite Game characteristic of advancing a just cause.²

Pastor Four responded that having "preemptory conversations" helped them address IDD more effectively. This congregation's leadership team meets twice a month for dinner. During this time, they discuss prevalent cultural and theological issues, both inside and outside the church. While this leadership group has a wide range of ideological stances, the practice of having these difficult conversations has had two results. First, having conversations such as these in the context of trusting, missional relationships foster further trust. The members of the leadership team know that, even though they may disagree, each member has the other members' best interest at heart. Second, having these conversations in the context of trusting, missional

² Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 32.

relationships afford the members of the leadership team the opportunity to practice having these conversations with people outside the team. This gives leadership team members a firmer platform from which to communicate the position of the church's leadership. The practice of having "preemptory conversations" reflects the Infinite Game characteristic of building trusting teams.³

Pastor Six said the action that was most beneficial in promoting unity in his congregation was learning what items needed to be addressed and what items could be left to address later, saying, "I am just having to choose which battles to fight, what hills are the ones to die on, which ones aren't." Ideologically driven disunity impacts his congregation in several ways; therefore, Pastor Six focuses on the issues that are keeping his congregation from fulfilling the Great Commission. One way he does this is by finding ways to address issues through flexibility. For example, there has been resistance to the creation of a youth group in the church. To reach the youth in his community, Pastor Six has started a "Youth Bible Study," which functions in the same way as a youth group. However, changing the name of the gathering has satisfied those in opposition to a youth group. Pastor Six has learned to adapt to the culture in which he ministers without hindering the church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission. In this way, Pastor Six has demonstrated the Infinite Game characteristic of preparing for existential flexibility.⁴

The researcher then asked the Pastors what they would do differently if given the opportunity. Again, their responses correlated to various characteristics of the Infinite Game and other aspects of the strategy given at the One-day Presentations. Pastor Three said that he would spend less time trying to convince those who disagree with church leadership. The expenditure

³ Sinek, 105.

⁴ Ibid., 185.

of this energy diminished the church leadership's capacity to lead the congregations in fulfilling the mission and vision of the church. This reflects the Infinite Game characteristic of advancing a just cause by not diverting the church leadership's focus from the Great Commission. It also reflects the strategic theme⁵ of energy follows attention.

Pastor Four expressed a desire to have had more "preemptory conversations" with those outside the church leadership team. He believes that having more such conversations, particularly with younger people, would have lessened the impact of IDD on his congregation during the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of these "preemptory conversations," Pastor Four would like to engage people from different generations in the discussion. Fostering a better understanding of different generational views would enhance the effort of building trusting teams, especially when one considers the future of church leadership. This would fulfill the strategic theme of communication for unity.

Pastor Five said he would take others' perceptions of him into consideration when communicating about ideological stances. He is concerned that others may view him as brash and over-confident; however, he believes he was simply communicating what he believed to be true. This caused tension not only due to differences in ideology, but also in the way congregants viewed him. This additional tension has hindered Pastor Five's ability to build trusting teams.

Pastor Six was concerned that his ability to not fight battles comes not from a desire to practice existential flexibility, but rather from a lack of courage. He, at times, has preferred to avoid a conflict rather than find a way to resolve it. All this has done is delay the pain of the conversation. It also has, at times, allowed the tension to continue unabated. This is not an

⁵ The Strategic themes are described in the Intervention Design section of Chapter 3.

uncommon approach. However, it does not reflect the Infinite Game characteristic of demonstrating the courage to lead.⁶

Interview with Pastor Seven

Pastor Seven had initially consented to participate in the focus group; however, a scheduling conflict precluded him from contributing. He agreed to give an individual interview in place of participating in the focus group. Pastor Seven leads a rural congregation with an average attendance of 65 in their weekend gathering. This gathering attracts a wide range of ages, with a variety of socioeconomic classes and professional settings represented. Pastor Seven did not believe that IDD was a primary issue in the congregation. However, there were some isolated troublesome incidents revealing the presence of IDD in relationships. A couple Pastor Seven described as a “key” left the congregation due to ideological differences with the pastor and church leadership, particularly in the way the church reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked whether this couple was more concerned with spirituality or ideology, Pastor Seven responded, “I think their ideology was influencing their spirituality directly, to the point where it changed their definition of spirituality...or at least their experience of it personally.” This interpretation of conversations and events reflect the point given in the One-day Presentations that ideology and spirituality are easily confused. This may lead one to assume they are acting out of spirituality when they are acting out of their ideology.

The researcher posed the same questions to Pastor Seven that he posed to the focus group concerning what was most effective in fostering unity and what he would change if given the opportunity. Pastor Seven believed that the most effective step he had taken to foster unity was

⁶ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 199.

building trust through giving and receiving love. When he and his wife came to the church 8 years ago, it was struggling; 1/3 of the leadership believed that the church had come to the end of its lifespan. Pastor Seven and his wife committed to teaching the Word and showing love consistently. As they had spent years building trusting relationships, the congregations were able to stay largely united during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election season and its aftermath. This was true even though there is a range of ideological views present in the congregation. Pastor Seven's actions exemplify the Infinite Game characteristic of building trusting teams.

Pastor Seven said if he could do something different, it would be to address a "root of bitterness" that had existed before his arrival as senior pastor. However, as the church had the appearance of unity, other issues took priority over addressing this. However, the "root of bitterness" affected a few during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the couple mentioned in the previous paragraph. Had that issue been addressed, perhaps the congregations would not have lost a key couple. Pastor Seven's evaluation of the situation reflects the conclusion given in the One-day Presentations that IDD is worsened by events. When a congregation has a superficial unity, external stressors will reveal the importance and prominence of ideological stances rather than on a spiritual focus of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Interview with Pastor Eight

Pastor Eight leads a congregation with an average weekend attendance of 400 in a suburban area. After a lengthy process of prayer, conversation, and consideration of the church's mission, vision, and values, the church leadership made the decision to use a transgendered individual's preferred pronouns. This decision has caused some families in the congregation to leave the church to worship elsewhere. In this wide-ranging discussion, the researcher arrived at

three conclusions. First, the church's leadership felt this decision would best help the church advance the Great Commission in a group that is not being reached by other biblically-based churches in the community. The church's leadership realized that some families might leave the church. They were willing to accept this, believing that

If we have to choose between a parent who has 200 churches in [our ministry context] that they could go to and find a home, and a trans kid who maybe has zero evangelical churches that are Bible-believing that they could go to and find a home...[we] understand that we are one church within the body of Christ and it's not necessarily a loss for God if somebody moves from [our church] to someplace else.

Second, the church's leadership believed this decision reflected their approach to fulfilling the Great Commission's command to make disciples. Pastor Eight emphasized this point repeatedly, pointing out that declaring something a sin does not equate to a discipleship process. Rather, the church made the decision to use a transgendered person's preferred pronouns partly as a reflection of holding a "long view" of discipleship. Pastor Eight referred to someone not being the same at fourteen as they are at 24. The church's leadership was concerned that alienating someone at 14 would not allow them to disciple that individual for the long-term. Pastor Eight described this attitude by saying, "A snapshot is not a journey."

Third, Pastor Eight affirmed the One-day Presentation strategic theme that IDD is caused by fear. He believed that much of the resistance to the church leadership's decision to use preferred pronouns was rooted in fear: fear of loss of safety, fear of "caving in," or fear of what further decisions might be made. While the church leadership has had several conversations with those upset by their decision, Pastor Eight said they should have had those conversations earlier, addressing the root of the fear rather than the specific fears that congregants may have.

Qualitative Research Conclusion

The qualitative research clarified and affirmed several points. First, the importance of relationships cannot be overstated. The tenure of the senior pastor, leading to long-term relationships, has a direct correlation to the presence and impact of IDD in a congregation. This was a clear result of qualitative research and affirmed by the quantitative research discussed in the next section. Additionally, stress on the senior pastor arises not based solely on a numeric drop in attendance, but on the damage to relationships with members of the congregation due to ideological differences. Second, IDD is often present in a wide cross-section of congregational characteristics; size, setting, and different approaches to addressing IDD seem to have no bearing on the presence or impact of ideologically driven disunity. Third, IDD is often more based on fear of loss than on intellectual differences. Misunderstanding this fact has led pastors and church leaders to address IDD in manners that have exacerbated the issue rather than fostering unity.

Quantitative Research

Initial Survey

Purpose of the Survey

The Initial Survey serves two purposes. First, the Initial Survey helps identify and define the ministry context of this action research project. This includes the nature of congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network, which provides a foundation for understanding the data concerning Ideologically Driven Disunity (IDD). Second, the Initial Survey provides data that reveals possible correlation between various factors and the presence and impact of IDD.

Data Concerning RMCN Congregations

The Rocky Mountain Church Network consists of 46 churches located in 4 states in the Rocky Mountain region, along with one church in Kansas and one church in Nebraska. The researcher recruited pastors and church leaders throughout RMCN via email, phone calls, and personal conversations. Twenty-two pastors and church leaders consented to participate in the action research project. The project participation represents 46% of RMCN congregations. These congregations either have a strong history of connection with the regional association or are experiencing a growing relationship with RMCN. While the researcher had desired to have 50% participation, the churches represented in the project are a sufficient representation of the congregations in RMCN.

Ministry context

The congregations represented in the Initial Survey are nearly evenly divided between suburban and rural settings, with 54.5% indicating a rural location and 45.5% indicating suburban. As there are only three metropolitan regions (Denver, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City) within the purview of RMCN, this result is an accurate reflection of the ministry context. Churches from each of the three metropolitan regions and the four Rocky Mountain states (Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah) were represented in this data.

What best describes your ministry context?

22 responses

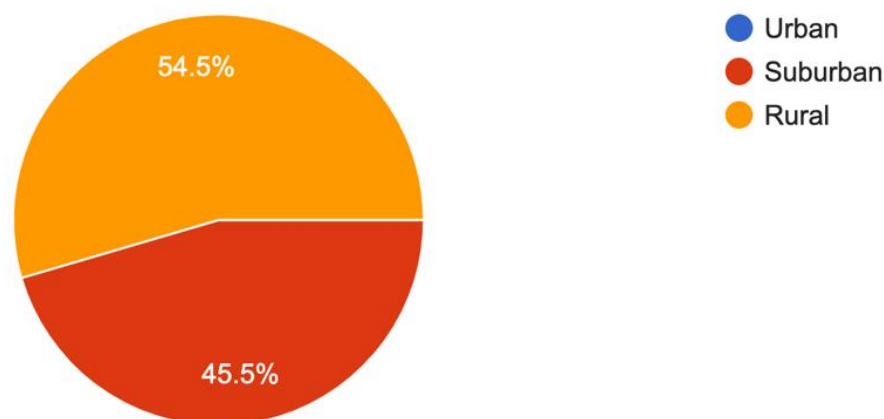


Figure 4.1 Ministry context

While no churches identified their ministry context as Urban, RMCN serves several churches within Denver. However, there was no participation in this action research project among those congregations due to several factors. Some currently have no senior pastor and the researcher had difficulty obtaining contact info for a different church leader. Others had out-of-date contact information. Others gave no response to the researcher's invitation to participate in this project.

Congregational size

Project participants report a wide array of worship service attendance, which reflects the varied nature of RMCN churches. This provides insight into the presence and impact of IDD within congregations with different dynamics. The size of congregations in RMCN varies greatly, with churches from 0–50 in weekly attendance to over 1000 gathering each week. There are churches with solo pastors and churches with multiple levels of professional staff accountability. There are churches with one service and churches with multiple services. These

various factors are present in both the suburban and rural churches represented in this project.

The varied nature of this data allows the researcher to identify trends and correlations that are not dependent upon a singular aspect of the ministry context.

What is the approximate size of your weekend service(s)?

22 responses

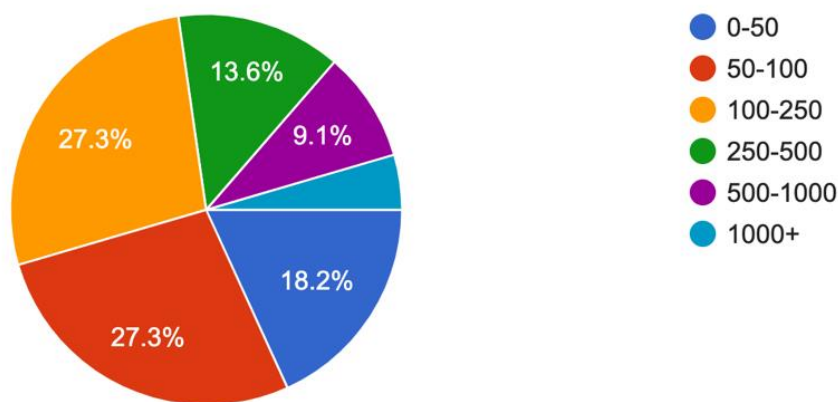


Figure 4.2 Congregational size

Age of congregations

The churches represented in the project have existed for an average of 88 years, with a median age of 87.5 years. Of the 22 congregations represented, 11 of them are over 100 years old, with two over 150. This data partly reflects the lack of church planting in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

Effectiveness in Great Commission fulfillment

Two methods of measuring a congregation's effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission are the number of professions of faith witnessed through the direct ministry of the

church⁷ and baptisms. Project participants reported an average of 12.9 professions of faith in the past 12 months. However, this average is skewed by the presence of one church that witnessed 124 professions of faith. A more accurate reflection of Great Commission effectiveness seen through RMCN churches over the past 12 months may be the median number of professions of faith, which is 3.5. The average number of baptisms in the past year in project participants' congregations is 11.1, with the median number of baptisms being 5.5.

To determine any correlation between Great Commission effectiveness and the impact of IDD, the researcher utilized an additional metric based on professions of faith and baptisms per congregant. One obstacle to this was the fact that participants chose between various ranges of congregational size rather than reporting a specific worship attendance. To account for various sizes of churches, the researcher used the midpoint of the congregational size. For example, churches that reported a weekend gathering attendance of 0 to 50 were considered congregations of 25 and churches that reported a weekend gathering attendance of 500 to 1000 were considered to have an attendance of 750. Churches with over 1000 in attendance were assigned the weekend gathering attendance of 1500. Utilizing this metric, congregations represented in the project reported seeing between 0 to 0.13 professions of faith per attendee and 0 to 0.12 baptisms per attendee. Any potential correlation between this metric and the impact of IDD will be discussed in a later section.

⁷ The Initial Survey specifically gauged professions of faith through the direct ministry of the church. This is differentiated from professions of faith that are witnessed through external ministries the church supports, including missionaries, parachurch organizations, or other Christian ministries. While important, supporting such ministries may not reflect a culture of Great Commission fulfillment in a local congregation.

Data Concerning RMCN Pastors

Project participants were limited to senior pastors or, in the case of a pastoral vacancy, a primary church leader such as a Chairman of an Elder Board or Church Council. This action research project was completed by 19 senior pastors and three church leaders. Each responded to survey questions regarding their tenure, education, and political leanings.

The church leaders in the survey have served their current congregations for an average of 11.2 years, with the shortest tenure being 6 months and the longest 35. The median tenure is 7.5 years.

How long have you served at your church?

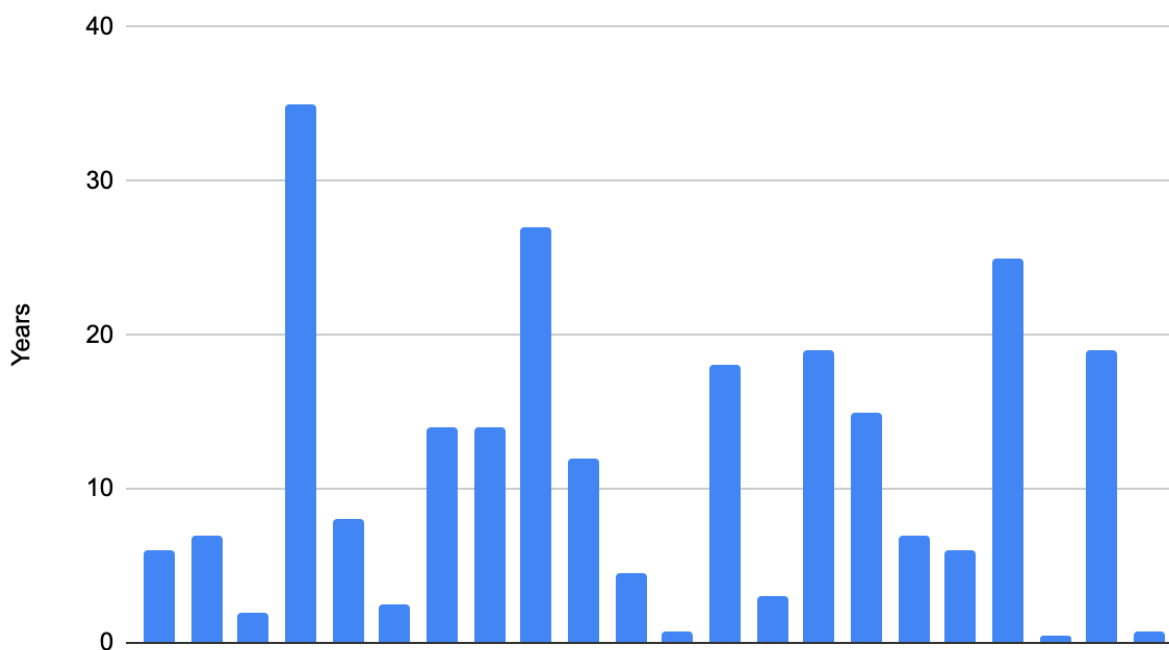


Figure 4.3 Tenure of project participants

The project participants reported their highest level of education. Fifty percent of respondents indicated they had received a master's degree, which was the most reported level of education. Two participants have attained a bachelor's degree, while one has received a

doctorate. The remaining participants have achieved either some master's level or doctoral level education.

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

22 responses

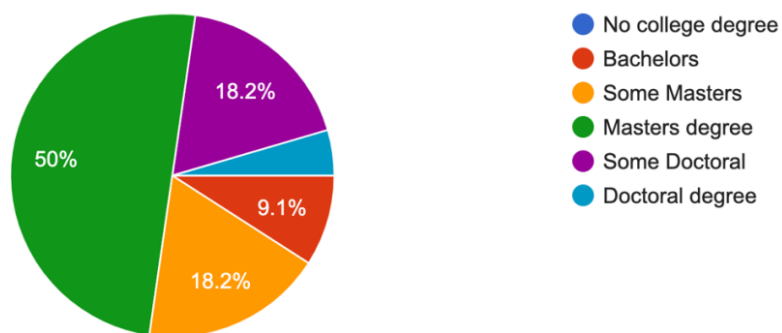


Figure 4.4 Educational level of project participants

Project participants also identified their personal political leanings. Each participant utilized a scale from Very Conservative to Very Liberal to gauge their own political ideology. To discovering any correlation between political viewpoints and IDD, the researcher assigned each response a numerical value. Very Conservative has a value of 1, while Very Liberal has a value of 5.

Rate your political leaning.

22 responses

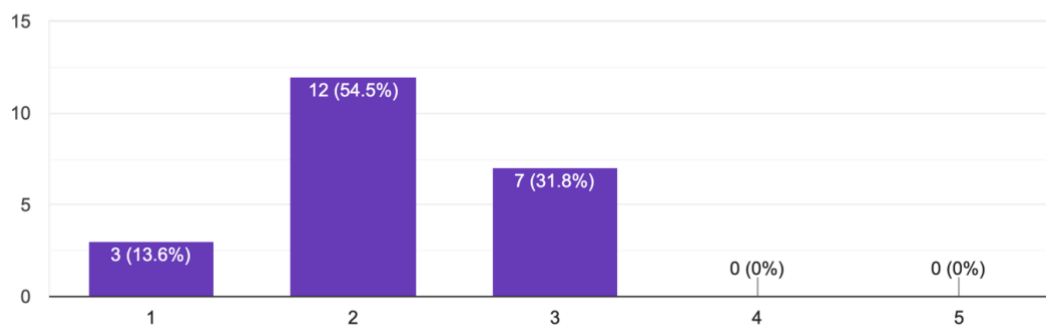


Figure 4.5 Political leaning of project participants

The project participants identified their political leanings from 1 to three, with an average of 2.2. This shows that the participants in the study identify their political leanings as Center-Right.

The Impact of Ideologically Driven Disunity

Impact on congregations

The Initial Survey reveals the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity in three time periods: the past 12 months, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 election season and its aftermath. The Initial Survey also reveals the impact of IDD on pastors, church leadership, and congregations.

Project participants were asked if their congregation had experienced IDD in the past twelve months. Of the 22 participants, 59.1% indicated the presence of IDD. The presence of IDD in churches represented in this project is shown in the chart on the following page.

Has your church experienced ideologically driven disunity in the past 12 months?
22 responses

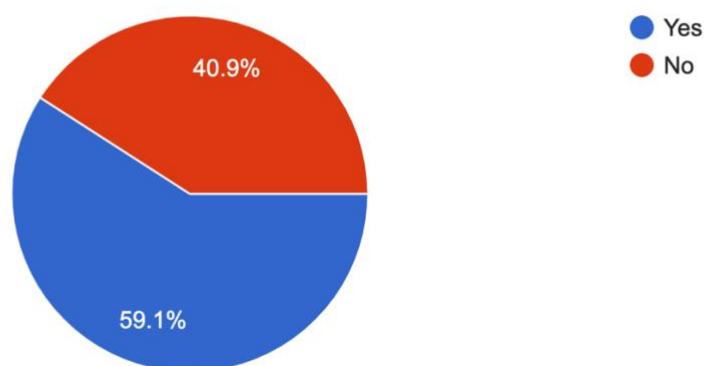


Figure 4.6 Presence of IDD in past 12 months

Project participants also rated the impact of IDD on their congregation on a scale from Severe to None. This scale was assigned numerical values, with Severe equaling 1 and None equaling 5.

The average impact of IDD in churches represented in this project was 3.7.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

22 responses

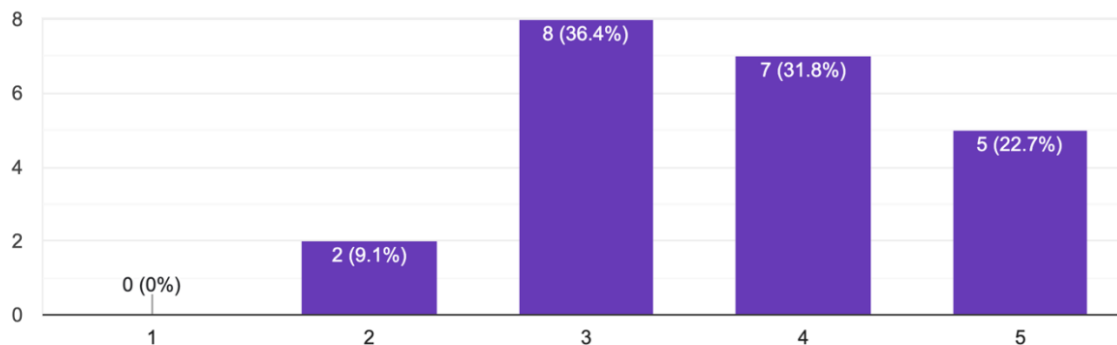


Figure 4.7 Impact of IDD in congregation

Project participants indicated that events, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election season and its aftermath, worsened ideologically driven disunity. 72.7% of participants indicated that IDD was worsened by the pandemic.

Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic?

22 responses

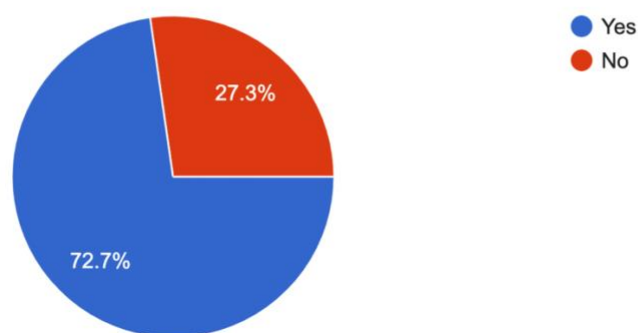


Figure 4.8 IDD during the COVID-19 pandemic

Project participants also indicated IDD had greater impact during the COVID-19 pandemic than during the past 12 months, averaging 3.4 on the same scale used to determine the impact of IDD during the past 12 months. This is an increase of reported impact of 7%.

Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.
22 responses

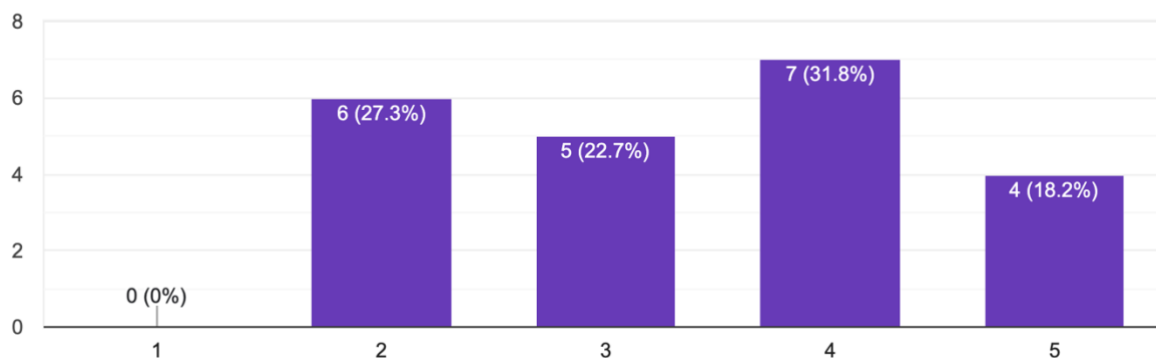


Figure 4.9 Impact of IDD during COVID-19 pandemic

The 2020 election and its aftermath also increased the presence of ideologically driven disunity, with 54.5% of participants indicating an increase in IDD. According to project participants, however, the impact of IDD was less than the past 12 months, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic. The average response to the impact of IDD, using the same scale as the previous two examples, was 3.82. This represents a 3.8% decrease in perceived impact versus the impact of IDD during the past 12 months.

Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the 2020 election and its aftermath?

22 responses

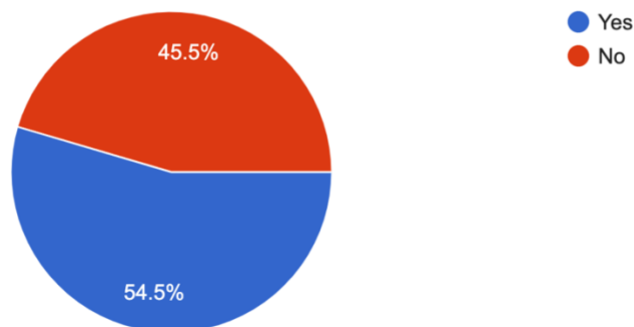


Figure 4.10 IDD during the 2020 election season

According to project participants, however, the impact of IDD was less than the past 12 months, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic. The average response to the impact of IDD, using the same scale as the previous two examples, was 3.82. This represents a 3.8% decrease in perceived impact versus the impact of IDD during the past 12 months.

Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

22 responses

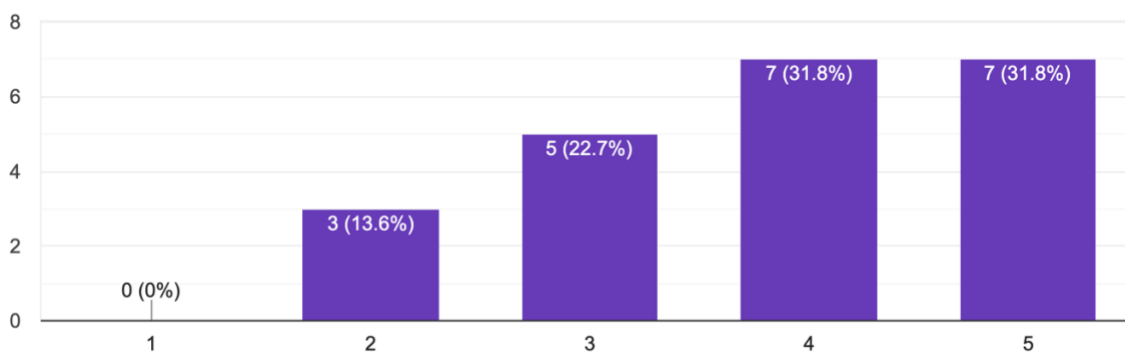


Figure 4.11 Impact of IDD during 2020 election season

The presence of ideologically driven disunity has had an impact on congregational life and on the ability to fulfill the Great Commission. When asked if people had left their congregation in

the past 12 months due to ideological differences with church leadership or with other members of the congregation, 45.5% of participants responded, “Yes.” Participants also indicated that IDD had impacted their church’s ability to fulfill the Great Commission.

Has ideologically driven disunity impacted your church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission?
22 responses

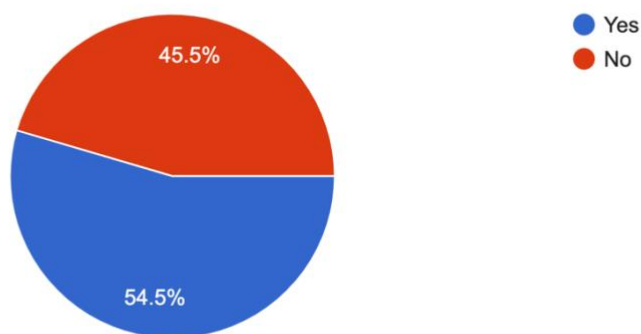


Figure 4.12 IDD and mission fulfillment

Impact on pastors and church leadership

The impact of ideologically driven disunity on pastors in RMCN is evident. 77.3% of project participants reported that IDD caused stress on the senior pastor. This is 31% higher than the reported presence of ideologically driven disunity. Stress on church leadership is evident as well, with 72.7% of the project participants indicating their leadership group has felt stress due to IDD.

Has ideologically driven disunity caused stress on the pastor?

22 responses

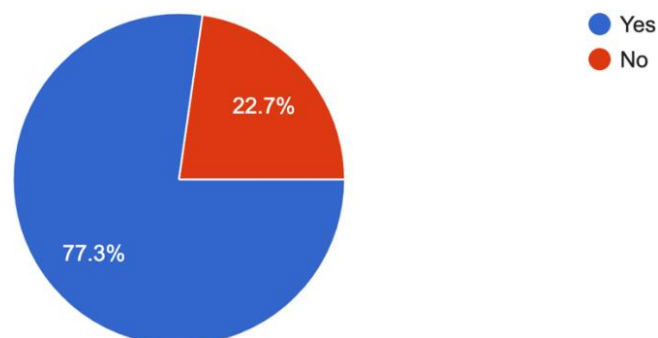


Figure 4.13 IDD and stress on pastors

While both pastors and church leadership have experienced stress due to ideologically driven disunity, church staff, and leadership groups have experienced unity. Despite 59.1% of project participants reporting disunity in their congregations, only 27.3% reported IDD in their leadership group. When asked to rate the impact of IDD on their leadership group, participants reported extremely low impact. Using the same scale from Severe (1) to None (5), participants rated the impact of IDD on their leadership group at an average of 4.3.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your leadership group.

22 responses

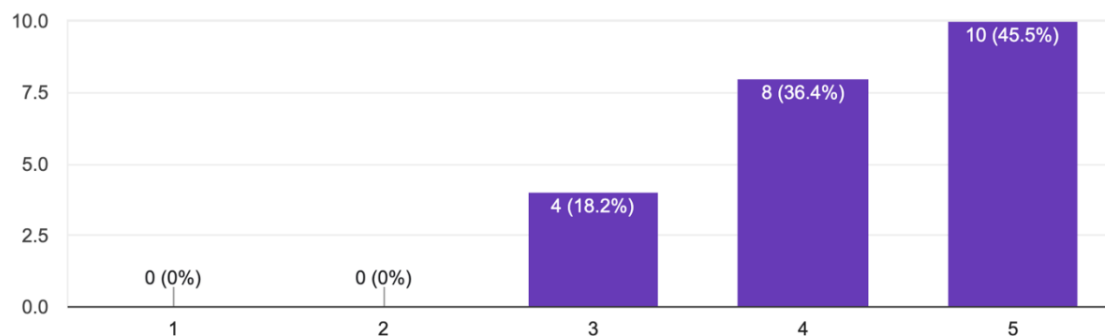


Figure 4.14 Impact of IDD on church leadership group

The impact of IDD on church staff⁸ was rated even lower, with only 18.2% of respondents indicating the presence of disunity. Further, the impact of ideologically driven disunity was rated even lower than the impact on church leadership, with an average of 4.4 on the same scale.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity among your staff (paid and/or volunteer).

22 responses

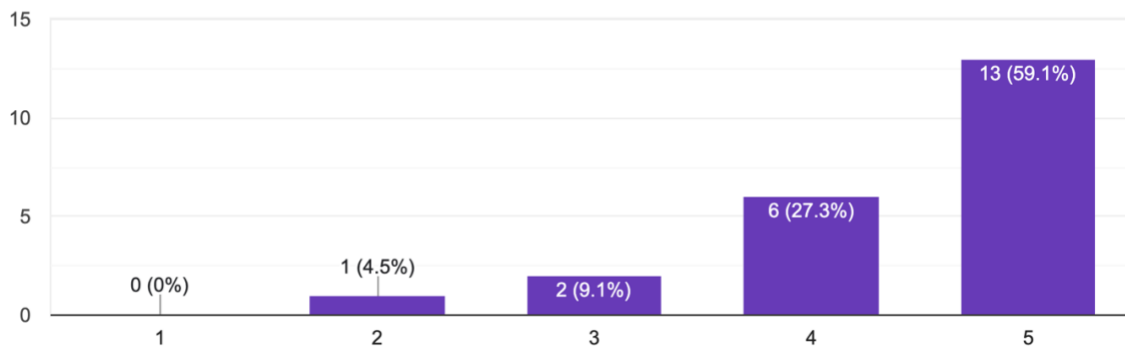


Figure 4.15 Impact of IDD on church staff

⁸ For the purposes of this study, church staff is defined as paid and/or volunteer.

Statistical Correlations in the Initial Survey Data

The Initial Survey revealed several statistical correlations. What is more unexpected, however, was the relative lack of correlations in the data. The researcher asked about several factors that might have influenced the presence of ideologically driven disunity. Most of these factors, however, seem to have no effect on the presence of IDD. Some of this was due to the monolithic nature of the responses to some questions. For example, questions regarding the soteriological view and preaching style of the project participants engendered one response that was so overwhelmingly monolithic that the results were rendered statistically irrelevant due to being nearly the same as the entire participant pool.

How would you define your soteriology?

22 responses

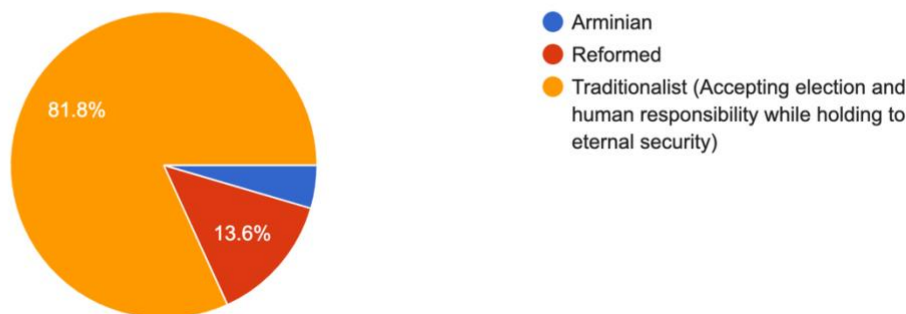


Figure 4.16 Soteriology of project participants

While 81.8% of project participants defined their soteriology as “Traditionalist,” responses to the question, “What is your typical preaching style?” were even more uniform. 90.9% of participants said they utilize an expository preaching style, with only 9.1% identifying their preaching as topical.

What is your typical preaching style?

22 responses

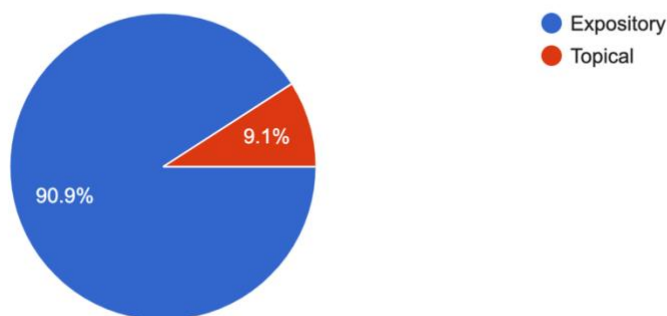


Figure 4.17 Preaching style of project participants

Other data revealed no correlation between specific factors and the presence of ideologically driven disunity. For example, neither the number of professions of faith in the past 12 months nor the number of baptisms in the same period bore any relevance to the presence or impact of ideologically driven disunity. This was the same result when the time parameter was the past twelve months, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the 2020 election and its aftermath. Similar results were achieved when considering the political activity of the project participant, the size of the congregation, or the socioeconomic status of the congregation.

Using the Pearson correlation coefficient,⁹ the researcher discovered several correlations between different variables and the presence of IDD. The Pearson correlation coefficient measures correlation between two sets of variables on a scale from -1 to 1. Correlation coefficients from -1 to 0 are considered negative correlations, whereas coefficients from 0 to 1

⁹ “Correlation Coefficient: Simple Definition, Formula, Easy Steps,” Statistics How To, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.statisticshowto.com/probability-and-statistics/correlation-coefficient-formula/>.

are positive correlations.¹⁰ Within negative and positive correlations there are widely accepted ranges determining whether the correlation is weak, moderate, or strong.¹¹

Table 4.1 Pearson's correlation coefficient scale

| Pearson's Correlation Coefficient | Correlational Relationship |
|--|------------------------------------|
| + .70 or higher | Very strong positive relationship |
| + .40 to + .69 | Strong positive relationship |
| + .30 to + .39 | Moderate positive relationship |
| + .20 to + .29 | Weak positive relationship |
| + .01 to + .19 | No or negligible relationship |
| 0 | No relationship (zero correlation) |
| - .01 to - .19 | No or negligible relationship |
| - .20 to - .29 | Weak negative relationship |
| - .30 to - .39 | Moderate negative relationship |
| - .40 to - .69 | Strong positive relationship |
| - .70 or lower | Very strong positive relationship |

While Pearson's correlation coefficients may show a statistical relationship between two sets of variables, it cannot identify which variable, if any, is causative. The only inference that one may draw from these statistical correlations is that there is a relationship between variables. For example, while there is a strong positive relationship between the length of tenure of the senior pastor and the absence of IDD, one may not conclude that the length of tenure caused the

¹⁰ A negative correlation happens when the value of one variable goes up while the other goes down. A positive correlation happens with both variables ascending or descending concurrently.

¹¹ "Correlation Coefficient."

absence of disunity. It may be the case that the senior pastor has a long tenure due to the lack of stress in an environment in which there is no disunity.

Tenure of the senior pastor has the strongest correlation with the impact or lack thereof of ideologically driven disunity. This is true whether one considers the past twelve months (PCC +.39), the COVID-19 pandemic (PCC +.41), or the 2020 election and its aftermath (PCC +.44).

How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

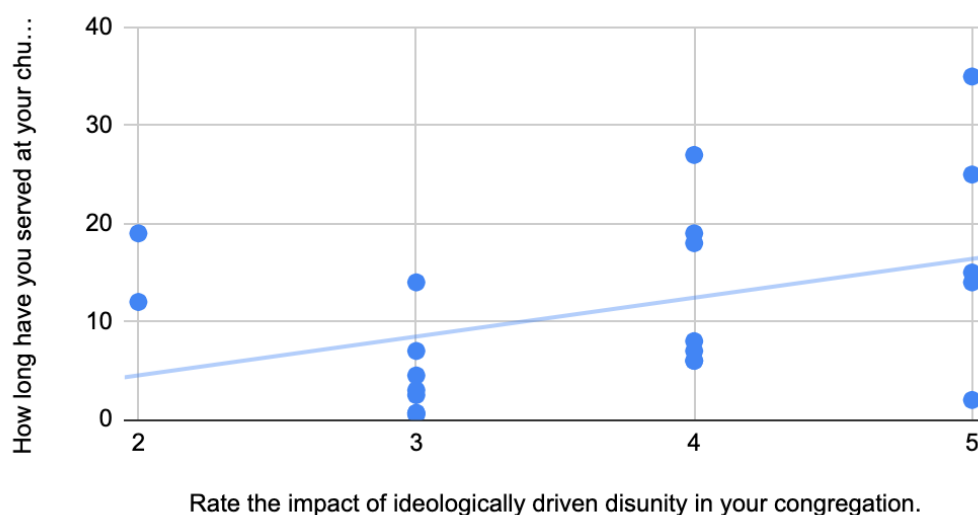


Figure 4.18 Pastoral tenure vs impact of IDD

Note: Placing data points on a scatter plot shows the strong correlation between a senior pastor's tenure and lower impact of IDD. The longer a pastor had served a congregation, the less impact IDD had during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

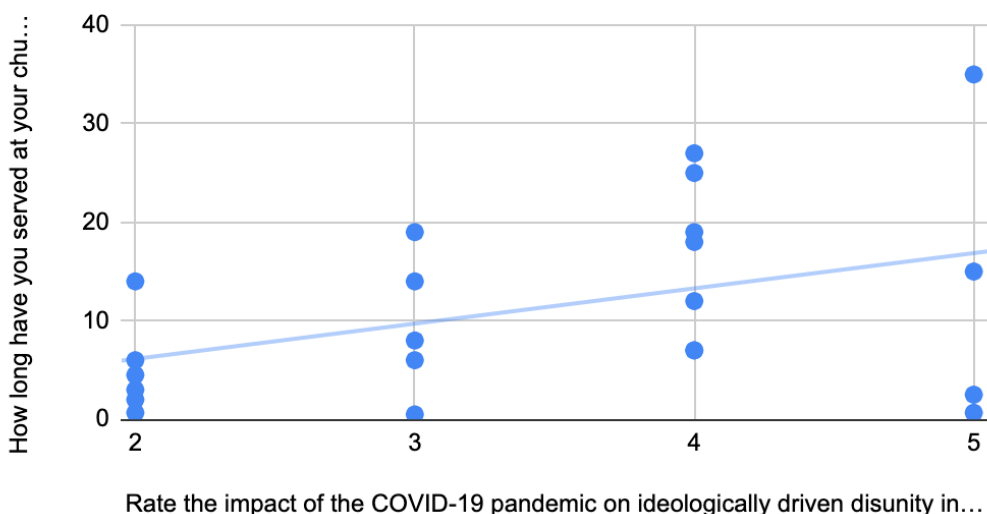


Figure 4.19 Pastoral tenure vs impact of IDD during COVID-19 pandemic

The same correlation is present when comparing data points concerning the tenure of the senior pastor and the impact of IDD during the 2020 election season and its aftermath.

How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

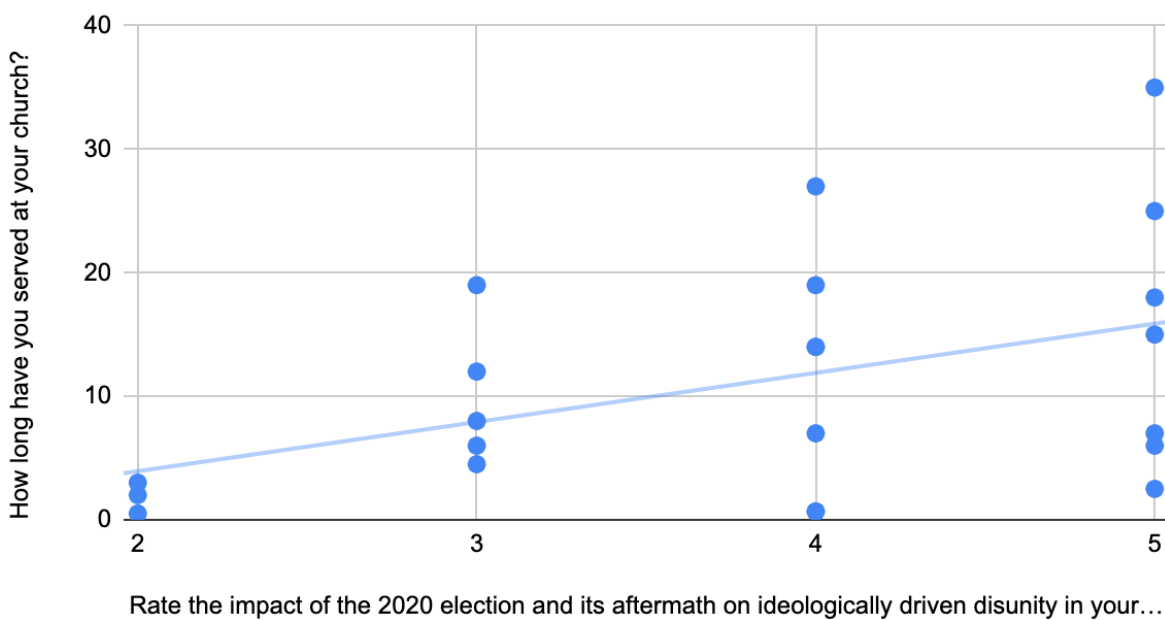


Figure 4.20 Pastoral tenure vs impact of IDD during 2020 election season

Several variables had a weak-to-moderate correlation. There is a weak negative relationship (PRR $-.21$) between the typical political leaning of one's ministry context and the impact of IDD in a congregation, meaning that the more conservative the ministry context, the less impact IDD has on the congregation. There is a stronger negative relationship between the typical political leaning of one's ministry context and the impact of ideologically driven disunity during the COVID-19 pandemic (PCC $-.27$). Of note, however, is the typical political leaning of the ministry context. When asked to rate the political leaning of their ministry context, the project participants responded with an average of 2.14 on a scale of 1 being "Very Conservative" and 5 being "Very Liberal." As both this average and the average rating of the congregation (1.86 on the same scale) are below the midpoint of 2.5, the typical congregation experiences IDD based primarily on levels of conservatism rather than on conservative versus liberal viewpoints. There is no significant relationship between the political leaning of one's ministry context and the impact of IDD during the 2020 election and its aftermath.

What is the typical political leaning of your ministry context?

22 responses

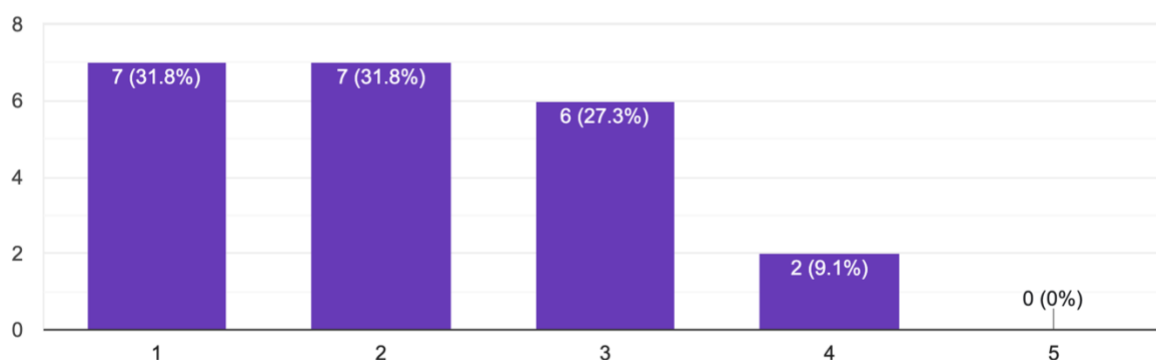


Figure 4.21 Political leaning of ministry context

The frequency with which the senior pastor addresses political issues from the church platform also has a moderate correlation to the impact of ideologically driven disunity. However,

this correlation is widely varied when confined to specific time periods. During the past 12 months, there is a near-moderate positive relationship (PCC +.29), meaning that the more often the senior pastor addresses political issues, the more impact IDD has in the congregation. However, there is a near-moderate negative relationship when the timeframe is confined to the 2020 election and its aftermath (PCC -.29), meaning the more often the senior pastor addressed political issues, the less impact IDD had on the congregation. Lastly, there was no statistically significant relationship between addressing political issues and the impact of IDD during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is also a moderate correlation between educational levels and the impact of ideologically driven disunity. This relationship, however, is different when one considers the educational level of the senior pastor and the typical educational level of members of the congregation. When the senior pastor has more education, the impact of IDD is less (PCC -.29). However, when the congregation has a higher education level, the impact of IDD is greater (PCC +.34).

When considering the correlation between the presence of ideologically driven disunity and the presence of clear mission and vision statements, the researcher could not use Pearson's Correlation as he was comparing two sets of "Yes" or "No" responses. Instead, the researcher compared the presence of IDD against the two possible responses to whether a church has clear mission and vision statements and whether a majority of the congregation embraces the mission and vision of the church. 53% of churches that have clear mission and vision statements experience IDD. This figure is 70% when the timeframe is constrained to the COVID-19 and 47% when constrained to the 2020 election and its aftermath. Ideologically driven disunity is exacerbated, however, by the lack of mission and vision statements and by a majority of a

congregation not embracing those statements. Churches without clear mission and vision statements experienced IDD at the rate of 100% in the past twelve months, 80% during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 80% during the 2020 election. Churches in which a majority of the congregation did not embrace the mission and vision of the church experienced IDD at a rate of 67% in the past 12 months, 83% during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 67% during the 2020 election.

Conclusions on Initial Survey Data

After collecting, categorizing, and analyzing the data from the Initial Survey, the researcher has come to several conclusions. The conclusions based on quantitative research, along with factors discovered in the qualitative research performed in interviews and a focus group, provide a clearer understanding of the problem facing RMCN senior pastors and church leaders. These conclusions also provide a foundation upon which methods to address IDD may be built.

IDD exists in multiple environments

The researcher sought to find a correlation between multiple factors that may influence the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity. There were several factors that had no bearing on the presence or absence of IDD, in some cases surprisingly so. Prior to receiving the data from the Initial Survey, the researcher supposed that measuring the number of professions of faith and baptisms would reveal a greater commitment to the Great Commission that would make a church more likely to avoid IDD. However, this was not the case as there was no statistical correlation between the number of professions of faith/baptisms and the impact of IDD. This is just one example of the presence of IDD regardless of the presence of other factors.

While it is tempting to believe that this is not a significant finding, the opposite is, in fact, true. The presence of IDD despite the presence of other factors shows that ideologically driven disunity causes issues for a broad cross-section of congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

The fact that IDD exists in multiple environments also reveals that the efforts of church leadership to address it have been largely unsuccessful. In comparing the methods project participants have utilized to address IDD with its presence and impact, the researcher could find no pattern or correlation either alleviating or worsening disunity.

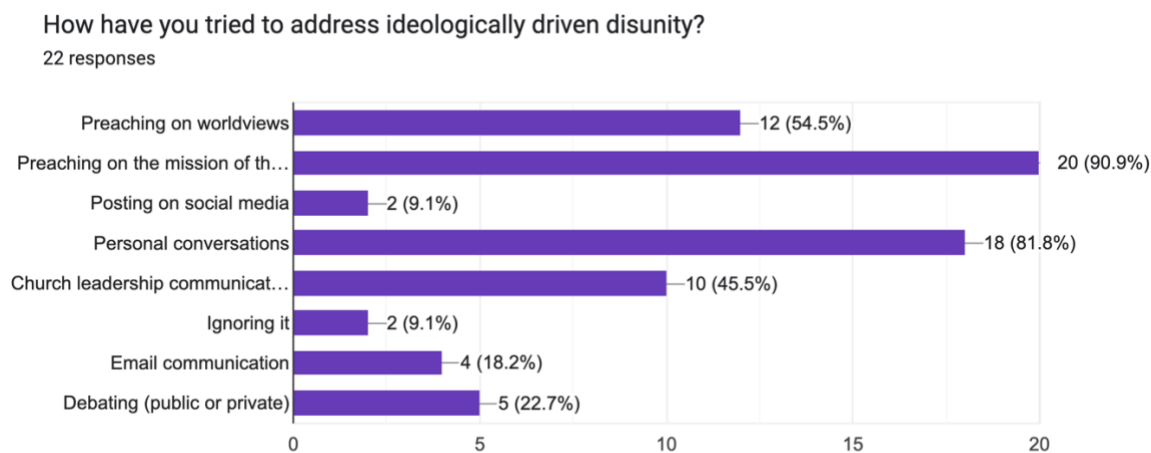


Figure 4.22 Attempts to address IDD

This lack of pattern or correlation leads the researcher to conclude two things. First, senior pastors and church leaders in RMCN have identified IDD as an issue and are trying to address it in multiple ways. The researcher concludes that church leadership sincerely desires to remedy the ideologically driven disunity found in their congregation. However, the methods that have been utilized have had little to no effect. Either church leaders need a different method, or their methods need adjusting.

IDD is worsened by events

Comparing the presence of ideologically driven disunity during the past twelve months with its presence during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election and its aftermath shows that IDD is not as prevalent during what may be considered a normal season—the pandemic has largely lost its influence in culture as it has abated, and the United States is between election cycles. However, the presence of ideologically driven disunity increased dramatically during the pandemic and, to a lesser extent, during the 2020 election cycle. The researcher concludes this is due, in part, to the foundational nature of ideologies. While many assume that their ideology rests upon their theology, the opposite is often true. Mark Labberton writes,

Evangelicals can affirm that faith commitments and their implications are essential to discerning values; but when evangelicals who affirm the same baseline of faith reach radically opposing social and political opinions, we have to ask what else is at play. The collision can't be explained by different definitions of the incarnation or by alternate views of the Bible and its authority. Rather, opposing views expose that underneath “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” lie basic instincts in our mental and social frames related to who and what actually matters.¹²

The reversal of the assumed priorities between ideology and theology can be attributed to the similarities between the two. The English political theorist Maurice Cranston described the characteristics of ideologies.¹³ They are comprehensive in that they seek to incorporate all the human experience. They are goal-oriented in that they often have an objective toward which adherents of the ideology strive. They require effort to maintain. They require a commitment to a cause. Finally, they are intellectual, driven more by reason than emotion. Collin Slowey writes, “The first four of Cranston’s characteristics of ideology, when disconnected from the word itself,

¹² Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 6.

¹³ Slowey, “The Christian and Ideology.”

describe just as accurately the function of religious beliefs as they do that of political ones.”¹⁴

When believers mistake foundational ideology for foundational theology, a congregation will have, at best, an ideological unity rather than one built upon the foundation of theology and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Because ideology is foundational, it takes on greater prominence when the pressure of an external event is exerted on a congregation. Wayne Dyer explains this in recounting a conversation in which he points out that when one squeezes an orange, orange juice is the result because “that’s what’s inside.” Dyer concludes, “Let’s assume that this orange isn’t an orange, but it’s you. And someone squeezes you, puts pressure on you, says something you Do not like, offends you. And out of you comes anger, hatred, bitterness, fear. Why? The answer, as our young friend has told us, is because that’s what’s inside.”¹⁵ Unless church leaders in the RMCN understand the foundational nature of ideologies and their rise to prominence during events that bring pressure upon their congregation, the cycle of increasing IDD during such events will continue.

IDD is weaker when relationships are stronger

Two findings of the Initial Survey reveal the importance of relationships in addressing ideologically driven disunity. There is a clear positive correlation between the length of the senior pastor’s tenure and the lessened impact of IDD—the longer the pastor has served the congregation, the less disunity the congregation experiences. As a pastor’s tenure lengthens, three things occur. First, he gains a greater understanding of the culture of the congregation,

¹⁴ Slowey.

¹⁵ “Why the Inside Matters,” *Dr. Wayne W. Dyer* (blog), May 13, 2013, <https://www.drwaynedyer.com/blog/why-the-inside-matters/>.

enabling him to more effectively navigate the times that “squeeze” the congregation. Second, he becomes more engrained within the culture, rather than being viewed as new to it. This allows a church leader to play a greater role in shaping the culture of the church into one which values unity based in fulfilling the Great Commission. Third, trust between the pastor and the congregation grows in the context of longer relationships. This trust allows the pastor or church leader to lead with more courage during difficult seasons of ministry.

In addition to seeing the importance of relationships in the tenure of the senior pastor, one can also conclude that ministry relationships foster unity. The data concerning the presence of IDD among church leadership and church staff reveals this. These two groups are most often committed to one another and to fulfilling the mission and vision of the church; therefore, they experience less IDD. As believers strive together to fulfill the Great Commission, ideological differences can take on less importance as they work toward a greater goal.

Follow-up Survey

Purpose of the Survey

The Follow-up Survey was designed to gauge the effectiveness of this action research project in equipping pastors and church leaders in the Rocky Mountain Church Network to address ideologically driven disunity within their congregation. As IDD has developed over a period of years or, in some cases, decades, the researcher did not presume the remedy to have immediate, short-term effects. However, the perception of pastors and church leaders regarding their preparedness to address IDD and the identification of the most helpful aspects of the strategy reveal the relevance of the study and what issues remain to be addressed.

Project Effectiveness

In answering the question, “Do you feel better equipped to address Ideologically Driven Disunity as a result of participating in this action research project,” 95.5% of project participants responded “Yes.” This result shows the effectiveness of the project in preparing pastors and church leaders in RMCN to address IDD. The participant who responded “No” clarified that answer in response to the question, “What would have been helpful, but was not addressed?” He notes, “The bigger ideology issues for us are more traditional: how church should be done, how music should be done, etc.”

Do you feel better equipped to address Ideologically Driven Disunity as a result of participating in this action research project?

22 responses

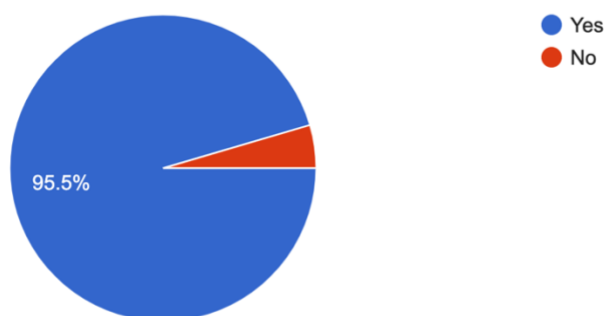


Figure 4.23 Perceived preparedness to address IDD

Project Participation

Project participants were engaged in the two primary components of the project: the Three-week Devotional and the One-day Presentations. A majority of the project participants completed at least 50% of the devotional, with 22.7% of participants indicating they completed 50%, 22.7% completing 75%, and 36.4% completing the entire Three-week Devotional.

What approximate percentage of the E Pluribus Una Ecclesia Devotional did you complete?

22 responses

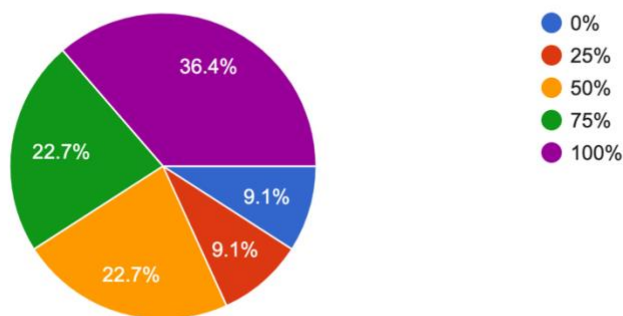


Figure 4.24 Percentage of devotional completed

All project participants engaged with the One-day Presentations by various means. 54.5% of participants attended a One-day Presentation live in Taylorsville, UT; Broomfield, CO; or Sheridan, WY. The remaining participants attended the presentation virtually, with 13.6% watching the livestream while the presentation was given and 31.8% watching a recorded presentation later.

How did you attend the One-Day Presentation?

22 responses

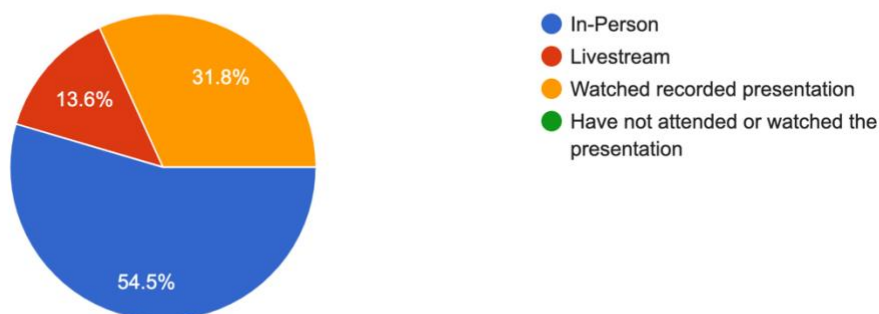


Figure 4.25 One-day Presentation attendance

Helpfulness of Project Components

The Follow-up Survey contained three questions designed to ascertain the helpfulness of various project components. When asked which project resource was most helpful as the participant considered how to address IDD, 68.2% chose the strategy given during the One-day presentations; this was the most oft-selected response. Both the Initial Survey results given at the One-day Presentations and the Three-Week Devotional were chose by 13.6% of project participants.

Which project resource was most helpful as you consider how to address IDD?

22 responses

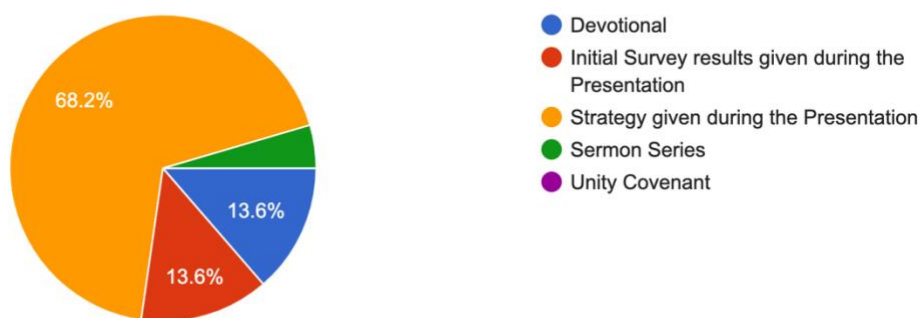


Figure 4.26 Most helpful project resource

The Initial Survey conclusion, given at the One-Day Presentations, that was identified as the most helpful was “IDD is weaker when relationships are stronger.” This conclusion was chosen as most helpful by 77.3% of project participants.

Which survey conclusion (given at the presentation) was the most helpful?

22 responses

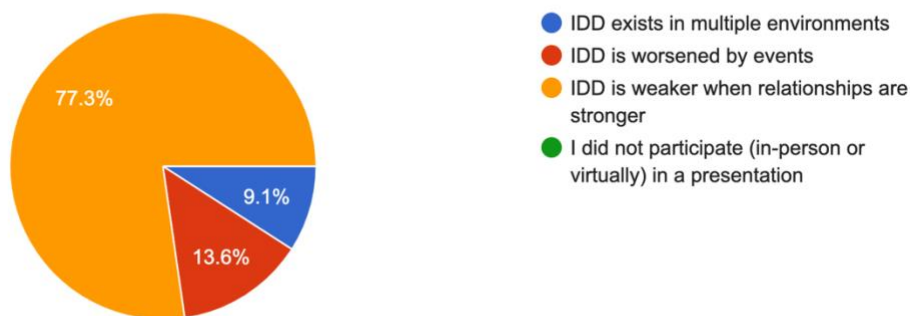


Figure 4.27 Most helpful survey conclusion

The researcher asked project participants to choose two components of the strategy given at the One-Day Presentations as the most helpful. “Understanding the foundational nature of ideologies” was chosen by eight participants. Both “Understanding that disunity is caused by fear” and “The Infinite Game—Build Trusting Teams” received 6 selections. The only component that was not selected by any participant was “The Infinite Game—Prepare for Existential Flexibility.”

Which component of the strategy was most helpful? Please select two.

22 responses

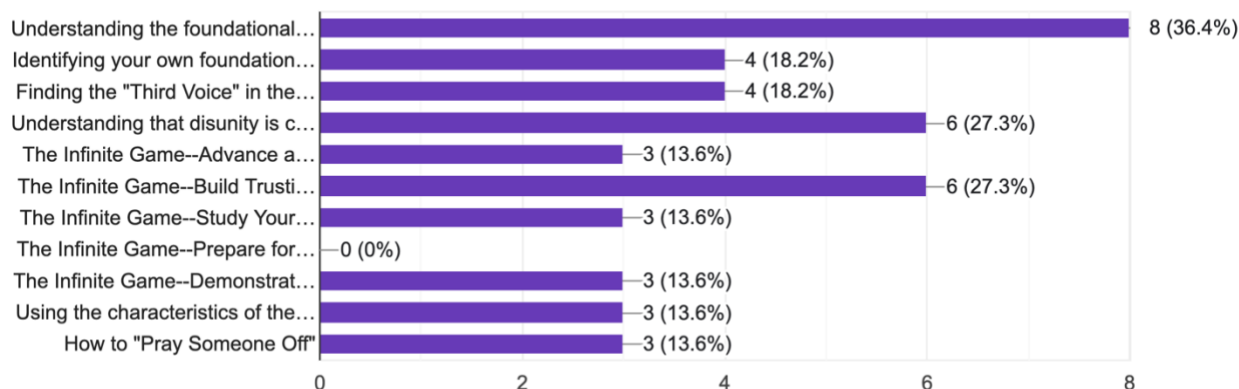


Figure 4.28 Most helpful strategy component

Project participants were not likely to use the project components in the context of their congregation. When asked to rate the likelihood of using various components in their congregation on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “Very Unlikely” and 5 being “Very Likely,” more participants responded on the “Unlikely” spectrum. The participants who said they were unlikely to use the Three-week Devotional in their congregation were then asked to explain why they were unlikely. There were three common responses. First, project participants were more inclined to use this with their leadership group rather than their congregation. Second, IDD was not a prevalent issue in their congregation. Third, the Three-week Devotional format did not align with their congregation’s approach to discipleship.

How likely are you to use the devotional in the congregation you serve?

22 responses

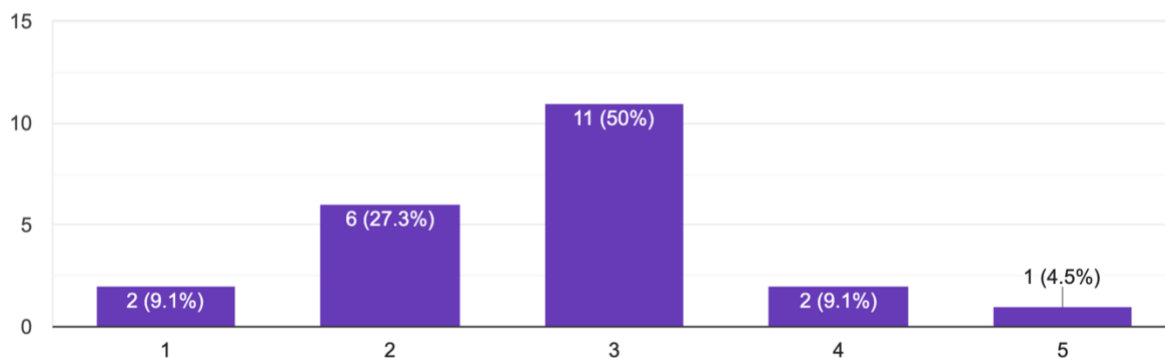


Figure 4.29 Likelihood of implementing devotional

More participants indicated they were likely to use the sermon series in their approach to addressing ideologically driven disunity in their congregation. Those who were unlikely to use the sermon series indicated either IDD was not a pressing issue in their congregation or the preaching schedule at their church did not allow for adding the series.

How likely are you to use the sermon series?

22 responses

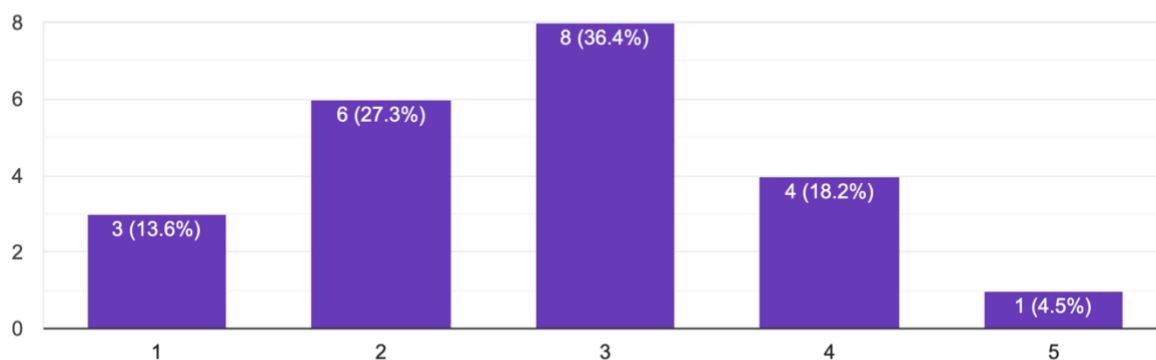


Figure 4.30 Likelihood of implementing sermon series

The likelihood of a project participant using the Unity Covenant in their congregation was the same as the likelihood of using the sermon series. Those who were unlikely to use the Unity Covenant expressed no need to address IDD, particularly using a tool like the Unity Covenant.

Impact on Personal Conversations

In the time since their participation in this action research project, 59.1% of project participants have engaged in personal conversations addressing IDD. When asked to rate the change in their personal conversations addressing IDD, project participants responded with an average of 2.47 on a scale of 1 (More Effective) to 5 (Less Effective).

If yes, rate the change in your personal conversations addressing IDD since your participation.

13 responses

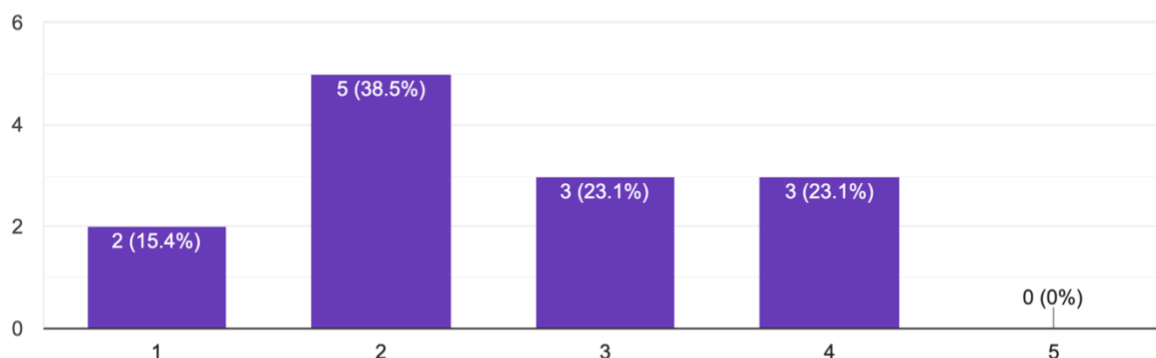


Figure 4.31 Change in personal conversations

Conclusions from Follow-Up Survey Data

After collecting, sorting, and analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data obtained through the Follow-up Survey, the Researcher has come to several conclusions. These conclusions give clarity to the effectiveness of the project and potential future projects to help pastors and church leaders in the Rocky Mountain Church Network address ideologically driven disunity in their congregations.

A lack of understanding exacerbates IDD

The fact project participants chose the two components that sought to bring deeper understanding concerning the nature of ideologies and IDD leads the researcher to conclude that pastors and church leaders have had a fundamental misunderstanding of ideologically driven disunity. This misunderstanding has led some to address IDD in a manner which exacerbates the situation rather than alleviates it. If pastors and church leaders are to be able to address IDD, they must have a better understanding of the foundational nature of ideologies. Without understanding this, pastors and church leaders will be tempted to address the outworking of ideologies rather

than helping congregants understand the impact their ideologies have on the way they view Scripture, theology, and the way in which one interacts with culture and others.

Secondly, helping pastors and church leaders understand that disunity is caused by fear will give pastors and church leaders the ability to address IDD through love, rather than through debate. The tendency to try to address IDD through strong stances or debate simply increases the likelihood that congregants will fear losing, causing them to act in a manner which will increase disunity. As pastors and church leaders have a greater understanding of the role of fear in disunity, they will be better equipped to address it.

The importance of training leadership

Both in explaining why they were unlikely to use project components and in describing what would have been helpful but was not addressed in the project, participants most often referred to helping their church leadership understand how to address IDD. As part of Building Trusting Teams, helping pastors and church leaders understand how to give their leadership boards the ability to address IDD will be an important step moving forward. This will be addressed more fully in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Both the qualitative and quantitative data show ideologically driven disunity as present and impactful in congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network. As IDD often causes stress on pastors and church leaders and hinders a congregation's efforts to fulfill the Great Commission, helping them understand the nature of ideologies and IDD will help churches in RMCN better fulfill the mandate to make disciples.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In the current cultural and political climate which has seen an increase in ideological tension in communities, families, and workplaces, a decrease in ideologically driven disunity will be significant. Understanding the nature of ideologies and executing an intentional strategy for addressing IDD is more effective than pastors and church leaders taking bold stands for one ideological position or another. Churches that effectively address ideologically driven disunity will be in a better position to reverse the general trend of declining church attendance as congregants better understand the Great Commission call for the church and avoid the disunity Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 1 and 3. Not only will congregations be able to reverse the general trend of declining church attendance, pastors and church leaders will experience less stress. This will allow them to focus on leading their congregations to have greater missional focus. Greater missional focus will lead to greater missional energy which result in greater kingdom impact.

Congregations within the Rocky Mountain Church Network are not unique in the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity.¹ This action research project found that pastors and church leaders in RMCN experience stress due to IDD similarly to pastors nationally.² Ideologically driven disunity is present in a majority of RMCN congregations and was worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election season and its aftermath. Responses to survey questions reveal pastors and church leaders in RMCN are anticipating a

¹ “Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval,” *PRRI* (blog), accessed June 13, 2023, <https://www.pri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/>.

² Shellnutt, “The Pastors Aren’t All Right.”

subsequent worsening of IDD during the 2024 election season. The prevalence of IDD in congregations across the nation and within the Rocky Mountain Church Network, combined with the resulting stress on pastors and church leaders, affirms the need for training in addressing IDD in a strategic, biblical, and missional manner.

The Follow-up Survey affirms the helpfulness of the project materials in providing tools for pastors and church leaders in RMCN address IDD in their congregation. Additionally, comments both in the Follow-up Survey and in post-project conversations show the project addressed a need in a relevant nature. The project will continue to provide help for pastors and church leaders in the Rocky Mountain Church Network as the project resources will still be available on the project website³ until it seems to no longer help in addressing IDD. Further, the researcher will continue to use the project strategy and resources to assist pastors and church leadership groups as they face this issue. The material in this thesis, the data collected, and the resources developed only reflect a portion of the time spent in study, prayer, and reflection on this crucial topic.⁴

Both the qualitative and quantitative data show the importance of relationships in both the presence of IDD and in addressing ideologically driven disunity. Stressors on relationships are inherently a factor in increasing IDD.⁵ When relationships in the church are damaged by IDD, pastors and church leaders are required to divert energy from fulfilling the Great Commission to either addressing the conflict within relationships or caring for their own

³ <https://www.rmcn.org/e-pluribus-una-ecclesia>.

⁴ Eric Hayot, *The Elements of Academic Style: Writing for the Humanities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 118.

⁵ Margaret Allison Clarke et al., "Role-Related Stress and Adversity Impacting Christian Clergy Resilience: A Pan-Canadian Study," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 77, no. 1 (2023): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050221133033>.

diminished relational and emotional health. With the presence of IDD, pastors and church leaders are often pulled in multiple directions,⁶ sometimes leading to a feeling of inability to satisfy various ideological voices present in a congregation.⁷

The presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity have developed in congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network over years, if not decades. Any attempt to address IDD will not immediately abrogate the effects of IDD. This means pastors and church leaders in RMCN must begin addressing IDD now while understanding that it may take months, if not years, to realize a substantial decrease in disunity. The time constraints of this project obviate the measurement of decreasing IDD. However, the Literature Review, quantitative research, and qualitative research affirm this project's usefulness in giving pastors and church leaders a better understanding of IDD and a strategy to address it. Project participants indicated more effectiveness in personal conversations after their participation.⁸ Anecdotally, several participants communicated their perception of the usefulness of the project to the researcher through casual conversations and emails. These results affirm this project's thesis statement. As church leaders have a multifaceted biblical and missional response to disunity caused by cultural and political ideologies, their congregations will display greater unity. This increased unity will then lead to increased missional effectiveness in congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

⁶ "Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval."

⁷ Clarke et al., "Role-Related Stress and Adversity Impacting Christian Clergy Resilience: A Pan-Canadian Study," 56.

⁸ This is discussed in the results of the Follow-up Survey in Chapter Four.

Additional Implications

Different Types of IDD

This action research project focused primarily on ideologically driven disunity caused by the conflation of political ideology and the practice of Christianity. There are, however, many other causes of disunity. Cleveland writes

[W]e often create subcategories that detract from the more important, all-inclusive category of the body of Christ. Before we know it, whether people are pro-life or pro-choice, Calvinist or Arminian, or black or white is more important than whether they are a part of the family of God. Further, these subcategory descriptions may start out as mere *descriptive* labels (such as pro-life or pro-choice), but they often deteriorate into *value* labels (Right Christian and Wrong Christian) that afford our group higher status.⁹

Whenever a cultural practice becomes engrained in one's ideology, disunity is often the result as one's particular ideology begins to supplant theology as the foundation upon which actions, words, and religious choices are based. In some cases, a theological stance can function as an ideological stance, creating disunity in much the same way. The principles and strategies proposed in this thesis may be applied to other causes of disunity in churches.

One issue that has caused disunity in many congregations is parents' preference for schooling their children. The preference for public school, private school, or homeschool has become a flashpoint for disagreement. The researcher has seen this in several congregations, both in which he served as pastor and in which he provided consultation. Additionally, Preston Sprinkle writes concerning this source of disunity. In addressing criticism of an article in which he identified potential dangers in homeschooling, Sprinkle writes

First, there's a difference between quantitative and qualitative research...My blog was more of the latter. It was my impression based on years of teaching college students who were home schooled, Christian schooled, and public

⁹ Cleveland, 50.

schooled, and talking to many pastors whose churches were filled with all three as well. For what it's worth, most pastors I know have said that the home school question has been a major source of disunity among their congregants, which any Christian should see as sad. Usually—speaking qualitatively and not quantitatively—it's the “home school only” crowd who are the primary causes of such division.¹⁰

In this case, the issue is not the preference for one schooling option over another. The issue that causes disunity is the preference of one schooling option and the dismissal of others. This divide functions as an ideological issue bringing disunity to a congregation and can be addressed in the same manner.

Another issue that has caused disunity that may be addressed by the conclusions and strategies developed in this action research project is the confluence of theological stances and ideological approaches. This may be seen in a particular theological stance becoming the lens through which all aspects of a congregation must be viewed. This typically occurs when one holds what may be considered a more extreme stance along a theological spectrum. For example, when one's soteriological stance falls at either the extreme Arminian or the extreme Calvinist end of the soteriological spectrum, disunity often results as one judges every word, action, or leadership decision in the same way one judges according to an ideology. When this judgment happens like an ideology rather than on theology, disunity within a congregation is the result.

The conclusions and strategies developed in this thesis apply to these examples in much the same way they apply to IDD. First, pastors and church leaders should help their congregations understand the primacy of the Great Commission. Second, leaders should understand the foundational nature of ideologies. Third, leaders should remember that disunity is often caused by fear. In the case of the school choice illustration, parent's may fear their children

¹⁰ Preston Sprinkle, “The Dangers of Homeschooling: Part 2,” *Theology in the raw*, January 15, 2015, <https://theologyintheraw.com/the-dangers-of-homeschooling-part-2/>.

adopting a different ideology than they hold. In the case of the soteriological illustration, one may fear the loss of perceived scriptural fidelity. In either case, the issue is best addressed through love and building a trusting team rather than taking a stand and furthering the discord that arises from ideologically driven disunity. Fourth, leaders should apply the principles of The Infinite Game to avoid exacerbating disunity through furthering an oppositional environment.

Different Types of Environments

This project focused on congregations served by the Rocky Mountain Church Network. However, the conclusions and strategies developed through this project may have broader usage. While there are unique theological, cultural, and environmental factors that churches within RMCN face, they are not unique in experiencing the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity. Moore writes, “I don’t know of a single church that’s not affected by this.”¹¹ Pastors and church leaders need the ability to address IDD regardless of geographic location or denominational affiliation.

While the research project focuses on congregations practicing biblical and missional principles, the project may have implications for secular environments as well. Ideologically driven disunity is not a phenomenon unique to the church. Businesses, non-profits, governmental agencies, and even families can benefit from having a unifying mission that transcends individuals’ foundational ideologies and provides the context for a unified corporate energy producing attention. As IDD is based more upon ideology than theology, the conclusions and strategies of this action research project can be used to address IDD in a secular setting similarly to a congregational setting.

¹¹ Alberta, “How Politics Poisoned the Evangelical Church.”

Business endeavors can be hampered by disunity just as a congregation's efforts to fulfill the Great Commission can be hindered by IDD. Chukwuma Asala writes, "As a business or company grows, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain unity and great care must be taken to keep the organization motivated and loyal to the mission statement of the company."¹² The importance of an organization maintaining focus on their mission cannot be overstated. This fact is corroborated by research showing the impact of communicating an organization's mission clearly and increased unity and performance.¹³ By listening to a third voice, a clear mission statement in the case of a secular for-profit organization, disunity can be minimized. Additionally, business leaders can apply the relational and communication aspects of this project to address disunity.

Nonprofits and governmental organizations experience disunity for many of the same reasons. To achieve their desired objectives, leaders in these organizations must be prepared to address IDD. Once again, a clear purpose, combined with relational and purposeful communication practices, will allow nonprofit and governmental organizations to succeed without the hindrances of IDD.¹⁴ This will happen as nonprofit and governmental leaders understand root causes of IDD, identify and articulate the purpose of the organization, and avoid the zero-sum game of ideological winners and losers.

¹² "Signs of Disunity in an Organization," Gaebler.com Resources for Entrepreneurs, accessed June 15, 2023, <https://www.gaebler.com/Signs-of-Disunity-in-an-Organization.htm>.

¹³ Hao Zhang, Tony Garrett, and Xiaoning Liang, "The Effects of Innovation-Oriented Mission Statements on Innovation Performance and Non-Financial Business Performance," *Asian Journal of Technology Innovation* 23, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 157–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19761597.2015.1074495>.

¹⁴ Margaret F. Sloan, "Transacting Business and Transforming Communities: The Mission Statements of Community Foundations Around the Globe," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 263, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764020948617>.

Families are not exempt from the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity.¹⁵ As the surrounding culture becomes increasingly divided, familial relationships experience division as well. While ideologies may differ between parents, children, or siblings, finding the third voice can help minimize ideological differences. Reinforcing this third voice through the practice of family prayer will help guard familial relationships. Joe Chelladurai, David Dollahite, and Loren Marks write, “In conflict situations, family members were able to displace and reduce relational tensions through praying together, suggesting that it was one of many important relationship-maintenance processes.”¹⁶ The Initial Survey in this action research project concluded when relationships are stronger, IDD is weaker. While the research did not conclude which factor was causative, it is imperative for those wishing to address IDD, regardless of the setting, to strengthen relationships to minimize the impact of ideologically driven disunity.

Further Research Possibilities

Questions raised during the One-day Presentations and responses in the Follow-up Survey indicate the desire for more information on helping church leadership teams address ideologically driven disunity. During the Sheridan, WY, One-day Presentation, an attendee asked whether there was any correlation between the tenure of the senior pastor and the impact of IDD on the church’s leadership team. This correlation was investigated subsequent to the One-day Presentations. Using Pearson’s correlation coefficient, shows a moderate positive correlation (PCC +.35) between the tenure of the senior pastor and the impact of IDD on the church’s leadership team. This correlation furthers the Initial Survey conclusion that IDD is weaker when

¹⁵ Pinsker, “Trump’s Presidency is Over. So are Many Relationships.”

¹⁶ Joe M Chelladurai et al., “The Family That Prays Together . . .’: Relational Processes Associated with Regular Family Prayer.,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 32, no. 7 (October 2018): 856.

relationships are stronger. Again, this correlation does not indicate causation; rather, it shows the relationship between the two factors. One possible conclusion is that as the pastor's tenure is extended, the leadership team becomes more ideologically homogenous, reducing the impact of IDD. Another possible conclusion is that as there is less IDD present in the leadership group, the pastor's tenure is extended. In either case, the importance of relationships, particularly in a church's leadership group, is clearly seen.¹⁷

A further possible topic for research and develop regards the training of church leadership to address IDD, rather than relying on training the senior pastor in the conclusions and strategies of this project. This was revealed in several responses to qualitative questions in the Follow-up Survey. Some who responded that they were unlikely to use the Three-week Devotional in their congregation wrote: "I am more inclined to use it on a leadership versus congregation level," and "Perhaps to leadership." These responses show that, while these project participants either did not perceive a need to use the devotional with their congregation or the value of the devotional in addressing IDD congregationally, they did see the necessity of helping the church leadership understand the mission of the church, Jesus' prayer for unity, and the impact of disunity on a congregation. Further, in response to the question, "What would have been helpful, but was not addressed," some participants wrote: "Would have liked some additional discussion on leadership development and structure within the local church and its impacts on IDD. I see possible correlations to how leadership functions and its negative or positive impacts," and "Also, exploring the ideologies of potential elders, ministry leaders, and

¹⁷ Joshua Caine Strunk, "Exploring the Convergence of Ministry, Tenure and Efficacy: A Phenomenological Study of Long-Tenured Pastors," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ed.D., United States -- Virginia, Liberty University, 2015), 126, Dissertations & Theses @ Liberty University; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (1734862153), <https://go.openathens.net/redirector/liberty.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/exploring-convergence-ministry-tenure-efficacy/docview/1734862153/se-2?accountid=12085>.

staff members seems like an important issue. And the inverse, the church needs to be able to remove key leaders from their role when their ideologies conflict with or eclipse the mission.” Further research and communication are necessary to help church leadership groups understand the presence and impact of IDD. Additionally, a method or curriculum to guide church leadership development regarding how to address IDD, both in the congregation and in the leadership group itself, would bring further benefit to RMCN congregations.

Further Project Outcomes

Churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network can expand on this action research project through developing activities that provide congregants with opportunities to express newly developed missional energy. This can take place at both the congregational and associational level. Congregationally, churches within RMCN will avoid the negative impact of IDD as pastors, church leaders, and congregants understand the reality of IDD and recognize its impact. While congregational identity is important, when that identity is built upon ideology rather than the missional fulfillment of the Great Commission, relationships within the congregation can suffer. Cleveland writes,

On the one hand, group formation involves promoting a group identity and engaging in prosocial behavior toward others in the group. On the other hand, group formation involves distinguishing the group identity from other groups by excluding and even derogating other groups. For example, Christians are fairly successful at treating others in their specific church group well. However, they run into trouble when they are asked to treat Christians who are different from them well, particularly if those Christians violate one of their core values.¹⁸

¹⁸ Christena Cleveland, “The Preeminence of Christ in Us: Overcoming the Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents to Disunity,” *Cultural Encounters* 11, no. 1 (December 1, 2015): 28, <https://doi.org/10.11630/1550-4891.11.01.26>.

As pastors and church leaders of RMCN churches help their congregations address ideologically driven disunity, the treatment of others who hold differing views will be more God-honoring and have lesser negative impact on the congregation's ability to fulfill the Great Commission.

On the associational level, this action research project has had a positive impact, addressing the concerns of the stakeholders, namely, the project participants.¹⁹ First, participation in the project gave pastors and church leaders the opportunity to connect with one another, helping them realize they are part of a community that faces the same struggles with IDD that they do. This gave project participants the assurance that their situation is not necessarily unique and that they have a community that is looking for ways to address IDD in their own contexts. Second, the connections created through the One-day Presentations fulfilled the Infinite Game concept of Build Trusting Teams on an associational level. As pastors and church leaders built connections and relationships through corporate participation in this project, avenues for further support and communication were created. There have been several conversations between project participants establishing further connection through which prayer, support, and encouragement are provided to help one another address their specific ideologically driven disunity situations. These have begun to take place without the input of the researcher.

As an association, the Rocky Mountain Church Network and its leadership are strategizing for future activities that will engage pastors and church leaders in fulfilling the Great Commission together. This will include further training opportunities and missional efforts such as church planting. This effort is necessary for two reasons. First, the number of churches in the United States has not kept pace with population growth. Sociologist Ryan Burge notes that “For

¹⁹ *Participatory Action Research*, 2nd ed., Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry (Taylor and Francis, 2019), 244.

every one percentage increase in population, the ratio of people to churches also raises by about half a percentage point. Which means, that houses of worship would have to open at double the rate that they are currently reporting in order to keep that ratio stable over time.”²⁰ Furthering this need is the fact that a recent LifeWay study showed that, for the first time in the history of the study, more churches in the United States closed than opened.²¹ As pastors and church leaders engage their congregations in furthering the Great Commission together with other congregations, the third voice, Jesus’ voice, will become louder than the voices of competing ideologies. In this way, RMCN will aid pastors and church leaders in addressing IDD in their specific context, which will reduce stress on pastors and church leaders and remove a common hindrance to fulfilling the Great Commission.

Conclusion

The divisiveness present in the culture at large has impacted churches within the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Most churches in RMCN have experienced ideologically driven disunity in the past 12 months, with that number increasing greatly when considering the COVID-19 pandemic or the 2020 election season and its aftermath. The presence and impact of IDD has created stress for pastors and church leadership teams and hindered congregations’ attempts to fulfill the Great Commission in their context. While pastors and church leaders have attempted to address IDD, many of those attempts have either been unsuccessful or exacerbated the situation. As such, the researcher, as the Regional Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Church Network, has attempted understand the presence and impact of IDD, analyze quantitative

²⁰ Ryan Burge, “How Many Religious Congregations Are in Your County?” May 10, 2023, <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/how-many-religious-congregations>.

²¹ Gabbatt, “Losing Their Religion.”

and qualitative data supplied by pastors and church leaders who participated in this action research project, and create a multifaceted strategy for addressing ideologically driven disunity.

The goal of this endeavor was threefold. First, the researcher hopes to give project participants and other individuals within RMCN the tools and understanding necessary to address IDD in their congregation. Second, the researcher desires to help alleviate stress on pastors and church leaders. This will give them the energy needed to focus on fulfilling the Great Commission rather than dealing with never-ending conflict. This will also create an environment in which senior pastors are more likely to have longer tenures, which has a strong correlation to the diminished impact of ideologically driven disunity. Third, the researcher believes that helping pastors and church leaders address IDD, their congregations will be more effective at fulfilling the Great Commission's command to make disciples. When these three goals are realized, churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network will be more prepared to glorify God through their missional efforts, their reputation in the community, and their unity as out of many, God makes one church.

Appendix A
Permission Letter

May 16, 2022

Reverend Mike Lundberg
President of the Board
Rocky Mountain Church Network

[REDACTED]

Dear Reverend Mike Lundberg

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The title of my research project is *E Pluribus Una Ecclesia* and the purpose of my research is to address ideologically driven disunity in churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

I am writing to request your permission to contact senior pastors and church leadership of the Rocky Mountain Church Network to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to complete the attached surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the research and participate in an online focus group to ascertain the level of ideologically driven disunity present in churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Senior pastors and church leadership will also be encouraged to present the attached teaching material and activities to help their congregations understand and address ideologically driven disunity. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to [REDACTED]. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Reverend John Craft, IV
Regional Executive Director
Rocky Mountain Church Network

Appendix B

Email Recruitment Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of my research is to help pastors and church leadership in the Rocky Mountain Church Network address ideologically driven disunity, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be a senior pastor or part of the leadership group in a local congregation affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the study (10 minutes each), participate in an online focus group with other church leaders (1 hour, if applicable), attend a one-day presentation either in-person or virtually (4 hours), complete a daily devotional study (10 minutes daily), and utilize teaching materials and activities as deemed appropriate for your congregation (time varies). The surveys will be anonymous; however, the nature of a focus group removes the possibility of complete anonymity. I will do my best to ensure confidentiality but am not in control of what other members of the focus group communicate outside of the group.

To participate, please click here (include hyperlink to online survey) contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] for more information.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about the research. After you have read the consent form, please click on the link to complete the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Reverend John Craft, IV
Regional Executive Director
Rocky Mountain Church Network
[REDACTED]

Appendix C

Verbal Recruitment Script

Hello [Potential Participant],

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Ministry degree. The purpose of my research is to help pastors and church leadership in the Rocky Mountain Church Network address ideologically driven disunity, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be a senior/lead pastor or part of the leadership group in a local congregation affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the study (15–30 minutes each), participate in an online focus group with other church leaders (1 hour, if applicable), attend a one-day presentation either in-person or virtually (4 hours), complete a three-week daily devotional study (10 minutes daily, 5 days/week), and utilize teaching materials and activities as deemed appropriate for your congregation (time varies). The surveys are anonymous; however, the nature of a focus group removes the possibility of complete anonymity. I will do my best to ensure confidentiality but am not in control of what other members of the focus group communicate outside of the group.

Would you like to participate? [Yes] Great, could I get your email address so I can send you the link to the survey? [No] I understand. Thank you for your time. [Conclude the conversation.]

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about the research. After you have read the consent form, please click on the link to complete the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Appendix D

Consent Form**Consent to Participate in Research Study****Title of the Project:** *E Pluribus Una Ecclesia***Principal Investigator:** Reverend John Craft, IV
Regional Executive Director
Rocky Mountain Church Network**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a senior pastor or part of the leadership of a local congregation affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to help pastors and church leadership in the Rocky Mountain Church Network address ideologically driven disunity.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete surveys at the beginning and conclusion of the study (10 minutes each)
2. Participate in an online focus group with other church leaders (1 hour, if applicable)
3. Attend a one-day presentation either in-person or virtually (4 hours)
4. Complete a three-week daily devotional study (10 minutes daily, 5 days/week)
5. Utilize teaching materials and activities as deemed appropriate for your congregation (time varies)

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants you should expect to receive from taking part in this study are increased capacity to address ideologically driven disunity to increase unity in your congregation, leading to greater mission fulfillment.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using codes.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Focus groups will be recorded. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

To participate in the research, you will need to pay for travel costs should you attend a one-day presentation in person.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the Rocky Mountain Church Network, the Board of Directors, or the Regional Executive Director. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher[s] at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Reverend John Craft, IV. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jacob Dunlow, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix E
Initial Survey

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia

Addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity

*Indicates required question

1. Have you completed a Consent Form? *

If you do not have access to the Consent Form, please contact the researcher, John Craft, at [REDACTED].

Mark only one oval.

Yes *Skip to question 2*

No

Initial Survey

2. Has your church experienced ideologically driven disunity in the past 12 months? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

3. Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation. *

Mark only one oval.

Severe

—————

1

—————

2

—————

3

—————

4

—————

5

—————

None

—————

4. Is your leadership group (elders, deacons, trustees, etc.) experiencing ideologically driven disunity? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

5. Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your leadership group. *

Mark only one oval.

Severe

—————

1

—————

2

—————

3

—————

4

—————

5

—————

None

—————

6. Is your staff (paid and/or volunteer) experiencing ideologically driven disunity? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

7. Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity among your staff (paid and/or volunteer). *

Mark only one oval.

Severe

1

2

3

4

5

None

8. Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

9. Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation. *

Mark only one oval.

Severe

1

2

3

4

5

None

10. Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the 2020 election and its aftermath? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

11. Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation. *

Mark only one oval.

Severe

1

2

3

4

5

None

12. Have people left your congregation in the past 12 months due to ideological differences with church leadership? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

13. Have people left your congregation in the past 12 months due to ideological differences with other members of the congregation? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

14. Has ideologically driven disunity caused stress on the pastor? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

15. Has ideologically driven disunity caused stress on church leadership? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

16. Does your church have clear mission and vision statements? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

17. Does a majority of your congregation embrace the mission and vision of the church? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

18. Have you recently (within the past 12 months) taught/preached on the mission and vision statements of your church? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

19. Has ideologically driven disunity impacted your church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

20. Rate the presence of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation *

Mark only one oval.

Prevalent

1

2

3

4

5

Non-existent

21. What best describes your ministry context? *

Mark only one oval.

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

22. What is the approximate size of your weekend service(s)? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-50
- 50-100
- 100-250
- 250-500
- 500-1000
- 1000+

23. What is the highest level of education you have attained? *

Mark only one oval.

- No college degree
- Bachelors
- Some Masters
- Masters degree
- Some Doctoral
- Doctoral degree

24. What is the typical level of education in your congregation? *

Mark only one oval.

- No college degree
- Bachelors
- Some Masters
- Masters degree
- Some Doctoral
- Doctoral degree

25. What is the typical socioeconomic status in your congregation? *

Mark only one oval.

- Lower
- Lower middle
- Middle
- Upper middle
- Upper

26. What is your typical preaching style? *

Mark only one oval.

- Expository
- Topical

27. Rate your political leaning. *

Mark only one oval.

Very conservative

1

2

3

4

5

Very liberal

28. What is the typical political leaning of church leadership? *

Mark only one oval.

Very conservative

1

2

3

4

5

Very liberal

29. What is the typical political leaning of the congregation? *

Mark only one oval.

Very conservative

1

2

3

4

5

Very liberal

30. What is the typical political leaning of your ministry context? *

Mark only one oval.

Very conservative

1

2

3

4

5

Very liberal

31. How politically active are you? *

Mark only one oval.

Extremely

1

2

3

4

5

Not at all

32. How often do you address political issues from the church platform. *

Mark only one oval.

Frequently

1

2

3

4

5

Not at all

33. How would you define your soteriology? *

Mark only one oval.

Arminian

Reformed

Traditionalist (Accepting election and human responsibility while holding to eternal security)

34. How often do you share political/cultural viewpoints on social media? *

Mark only one oval.

Frequently

1

2

3

4

5

Not at all

35. How long has your church been in existence? *

36. How long have you served at your church? *

37. How many professions of faith have you seen in the past 12 months? Only include * those through the direct ministry of your congregation rather than through external ministries you support.

38. How many baptisms have you performed in the past 12 months? *

39. How have you tried to address ideologically driven disunity? *

Check all that apply.

- Preaching on worldviews
- Preaching on the mission of the church
- Posting on social media
- Personal conversations
- Church leadership communication strategy
- Ignoring it
- Email communication
- Debating (public or private)

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

Google Forms

Appendix F

Three-week Devotional

Week 1

Day 1

“The local church is the hope of the world.” Many use this quote, first popularized by Pastor Bill Hybels, to emphasize the centrality of the church’s work in God’s plan of salvation. When I first heard this quote, I was dismissive. I thought, “No, it’s not! Jesus is.” As I reflected further, however, I realized that while Jesus is the hope of the world, the world will not be able to know him unless the church fulfills its God-given mission. Andy Stanley says it well, “Jesus is the hope of the world, and the local church is the vehicle of expressing that hope to the world.”¹ The work to which the church is called has both temporal and eternal consequences, helping people in desperate situations now and giving hope for all eternity.

Jesus’ teaching indicates his people are to be active. He says, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work.”² In the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14–30, a man “called his servants and entrusted to them his property” (Matt. 25:14, ESV). Giving one servant five talents, another three, and a third one, he then left on a journey. While he was away, the servants who received multiple talents were industrious and doubled those resources. The third servant, however, did nothing with the one talent given to him. Upon his return, the master rewarded the two servants who had increased the assets he had given to them. He then condemned and punished the third servant. However, he did not

¹ This quote is universally attributed to Andy Stanley, but the source is unknown.

² Margaret Allison Clarke et al., “Role-Related Stress and Adversity Impacting Christian Clergy Resilience: A Pan-Canadian Study,” *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 77, no. 1 (2023): 51–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15423050221133033>.

denounce that servant for not increasing his assets; instead, he condemned the servant's inactivity. He called him a "wicked and slothful servant" (Matt. 25:26, ESV). and cast him out.

God's church is to be about God's work. The problem, however, is Christians often have differing views as to what that work looks like and how the church expresses the hope of Jesus. Some focus on alleviating temporary discomfort, believing the church best shows hope through charitable acts such as feeding the hungry, comforting the oppressed, and welcoming strangers. Others focus on fostering righteousness in society by voicing and promoting political or cultural viewpoints. Still others dismiss caring for temporal needs while communicating hope through the gospel, focusing on Jesus' sinless life, sacrificial death, and resurrection. To complicate matters even further, each focus can have differing viewpoints.

God's people must be active, showing love and expressing hope. However, when believers have differing opinions on what that activity should look like, disunity is often the result. In the days to come, the project will uncover what God's mission for his church looks like and will point people to the true hope of the world, Jesus.

Reflection

1. Do you agree with Andy Stanley's thought? Why or why not?
2. How do you think hope is best expressed?
3. How have you seen differing thoughts on the church's activity cause disunity?

Day 2

The multitude of differing opinions concerning the focus of the church often leads to disunity and conflict. People within congregations and church leaders believe it is necessary to convince others of the rightness of their viewpoint. However, these viewpoints are commonly rooted in foundational ideologies, so convincing someone his or her viewpoint needs to be changed is highly improbable, if not impossible. So, how do we find common ground if we have different viewpoints? The solution to disunity is not debate; it is, however, finding a third viewpoint that transcends your viewpoint and mine.

With so many differing viewpoints present in the church today, the only viewpoint that matters is Jesus'. The church, after all, was his idea and belongs to him. In the first recorded use of the word "church," (Matt. 16:18, ESV). Jesus does not refer to "the church" or "a church." He says, "I will build *my* church and the gates of hell will not overcome it." Notice how Jesus expressed ownership of *his* church. Since the church belongs to Him, Jesus' viewpoint is the transcendent third voice that two people with differing viewpoints can look to find unity. But upon what does Jesus want His church to focus. What is the mission of the church according to the One who created it and heads it (Col. 1:18, ESV).

The answer to those questions is found in Jesus' last recorded words in the book of Matthew, commonly referred to as the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18–20, ESV).

There seems to be a lot of activity in this statement, but really there's just one command—make disciples. The mission of Jesus' church, as well as the focus of his followers, should be to make disciples.

The problem, however, is Jesus' followers often want to insert their own ideas about what making disciples looks like into the Great Commission. Some want to focus on instilling knowledge into others. Some think the church and believers should focus on outward acts of love. Still, others believe the Great Commission is best fulfilled through evangelistic efforts. Jesus addresses all these thoughts by describing and modeling disciple-making. Taken together, Jesus' actions and words give a clear picture of what disciple-making should look like so His followers can be active in doing what He wants them to do.

Jesus' description of His church's mission begins with baptizing. This act symbolizes one's entrance into a relationship with God through Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The inclusion of baptism in the Great Commission indicates Jesus' mission includes leading others to Him. Jesus modeled this Himself, calling people who were not following Him to begin following Him.³

As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him (Matt. 9:9, ESV).

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, [Jesus] saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fisherman. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Matt. 4:18–20, ESV).

³ Roy Gruber, Lead Pastor of Washington Heights Church in Ogden, UT, explains this principle well in his unpublished doctoral project.

There are many other examples of Jesus calling others to follow Him. The common thread is that Jesus called people to start a relationship which then would lead to other actions. To fulfill the Great Commission, congregations and believers should follow Jesus' example and evangelistic command.

Jesus' description of His church's mission also includes teaching. To follow Jesus, believers must learn more about Him, His life, and His sacrifice. If it is necessary for people to learn, then the church must teach. Once again, Jesus did not just command his followers to do this, He modeled it himself.

Again, he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered around him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. And he was teaching them many things in parables... (Mark 4:1–2, ESV).

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."⁴

While it may not be in a formal setting such as a sermon or a small group lesson, believers who are fulfilling Jesus' mission for his church will be continually learning and communicating biblical truth.

Unfortunately, many viewpoints on disciple-making end there. However, Jesus adds another component to the mission when he says, "teaching them to *obey all that I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28: 20, ESV). The goal of disciple-making cannot be simply the transfer of information; the transfer of information should lead to a recognizable change in attitude and actions. Simply put, someone who is developing as a disciple should look more like Jesus. This was a frequent theme in Jesus' own teaching.

⁴ Matt. 5:1–3. ESV, additionally, the phrase "opened his mouth" indicates formal teaching or preaching. The same phrase is used in Acts 8:35, 10:34.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments...Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me...If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:15, 21, 23, ESV).

Paul also shows the connection between teaching and recognizable change.

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (cf. 1 Tim. 1:5).

The clear voice of Jesus calling His church to make disciples through evangelism, teaching, and recognizable change cuts through the noise of competing viewpoints on what the church should do. Since the church belongs to Jesus, we should pay attention to Jesus’ thoughts when we consider what the church should do. In doing that, believers with differing viewpoints can find unity through Jesus’ mission.

Reflection

1. How does having a transcendent third viewpoint help address ideological conflict?
2. What view of disciple-making is most prevalent in your church? In your own view?
3. Which area of disciple-making (evangelism, teaching, recognizable change) do you need to emphasize more? What can you do to emphasize it?

Day 3

What would you do if you knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, you had less than six weeks to live? Some people would fill those days with “bucket list” items, traveling to new places and having new experiences. Most, however, would focus on the things that are important to them, spending time with family and making sure the ones they love the most have an opportunity to respond to the gospel. When time is short, it clarifies our intentions and guides our decisions, and we focus on life’s most important details.

The Great Commission is located at a crucial moment in Jesus’ earthly ministry. As he gathers His followers on a mountain in Galilee, He is in the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension. Time is short, so Jesus focuses on what’s most important for His followers. In fact, the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28 is just one of several instructions to His followers about what He wants them to do after He leaves.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20, ESV).

And [Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15, ESV).

Then [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus is it written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:45–47, ESV).

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21, ESV).

Jesus said to them... “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:7–8, ESV).

You may read these and think, “Those are just different accounts of the same teaching.”

When you pay attention to the details, however, you’ll see that Jesus came back to the same topic time and again following his resurrection. Paul Borthwick points out how this communicates the importance of the Great Commission:

Jesus gave these commissions in various times and settings. Matthew’s is definitely in Galilee; Mark’s is in either Jerusalem or Bethany; Luke’s is definitely in Jerusalem and the Acts account is definitely in Bethany; John’s is in Jerusalem, but the wording is completely different from all of the other statements. John’s record occurs on Easter night immediately after the resurrection, and Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8 immediately precede his ascension. The other statements occur over those 40 days...In light of the fact that we have very little post-resurrection material, the fact that these instructions appear several times underscores their importance.⁵

While the importance of the Great Commission in Jesus’ teaching is difficult to deny, it often does not take a prominent place in the viewpoint of Jesus’ followers when they think about how they should live and what the church should be doing. When the Great Commission has greater prominence in our lives and ministries, it is easier to listen to Jesus’ voice rather than the competing voices demanding our attention.

Reflection

1. What is the outcome when the Great Commission is not our central focus?

2. There are good activities that can take the place of the Great Commission. What are some of the good things that can distract us from making disciples?

3. How can you make the Great Commission more important?

⁵ Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion: Following Jesus and Loving the World*, 30.

Day 4

Who is responsible for carrying out the Great Commission? Some would confine the responsibility to the disciples standing on the mountain in Matthew 28, making the end of that gospel a conversation between Jesus and His followers as He gives instructions for the immediate future. Some restrict the responsibility for the Great Commission to church leaders: pastors, elders, deacons, and ministry leadership. This may not be a conscious restriction, but rather people placing expectations on church leadership to do the work of the church. As you look more closely at the Great Commission, however, you will find that Jesus gives a mission that a handful of people would not be able to fulfill. As you reread Matthew 28:18–20, notice how many times Jesus uses all-encompassing words.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (ESV).

Jesus used absolutes like, “all authority,” “all nations,” “all that I have commanded you,” and “I am with you always.” These phrases demonstrate that Jesus has more than 11 people in mind to reach the world after He returned to heaven. These phrases show that Jesus wants more people involved in fulfilling the Great Commission than just the leadership of your church. All, all, all, and always include you.

Jesus begins the description of his mission for his church by declaring that he had been given “all authority in heaven and on earth.” He says he’s been given what it will take to overwhelm the gates of hell (Matt 16:18). He confirmed this by defeating death by raising again after being killed on one of the symbols of the greatest power on earth—a Roman cross. Now,

based on His universal authority and power, He tells his followers, both those standing on the mountain and those throughout the ages, to continue His work.

That work includes making disciples of all nations. The 11 remaining disciples could not do that. Your church leaders cannot do that. But as all Christians make disciples while they are going about their lives. One way to understand the beginning of the Great Commission is that people in every nation can be reached by the gospel, learn who Jesus is, and have lives changed by the power of the Holy Spirit. You are always going. You go to church, you go to school, you go to the gym, you go to work, you go to family gatherings, and you go around your neighborhood. Fulfilling the Great Commission means that you are going in the name and power of Jesus, the One who received all authority and is sending you.

Jesus commands us to make disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” In another all-encompassing phrase, Jesus tells us that every word He spoke was important. They are all necessary for people to follow him. Once again, Jesus gives a task that cannot be fulfilled by a privileged or educated few. It can only be accomplished as all His followers continually learn about Him and tell others about Him.

Finally, Jesus gives an incredible promise that shows that the Great Commission is your call as well as the Eleven’s. Jesus notes that He would be with them always. Jesus did not just give eleven guys instructions and leave; He gave all His followers for all time instructions and then promised to be with them. That promise is just as true now as it was on a mountain in Galilee. The age has not ended. Jesus has not returned yet. So, He is present with each of His followers as they fulfill His universal call to make disciples.

Reflection

1. How have you let others do what Jesus calls you to do?
2. Whom will you be able to reach for the gospel that no one else can?
3. What does Jesus' promise to be with you mean for you? How will you follow Him knowing that He is with you?

Day 5

The eleven men who stood on a mountain in Galilee and received the Great Commission were a ragtag bunch. They had a lot of rough edges, some of which they carried even after spending time walking with Jesus. James and John were so prone to anger they were called the “sons of thunder.” If you read between the lines, you can see a rivalry between Peter and John. As John records Jesus’ resurrection, he recounts his and Peter’s journey to the empty tomb.

So Peter went out with the other disciple,⁶ and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first (John 20:3–4, ESV).

This is John, a member of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples, recounting the pivotal event of all eternity. Under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit, he is writing the Word of God that will endure forever. And he wants you to know that he could run faster than Peter!

This rivalry went both ways. After Jesus’ resurrection, he had a conversation with Peter on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus tells Peter what a life following him will hold, Peter asks a revealing question.

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during supper and had said, “Lord, who is it who will betray you?” When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man” (John 21:20–22, ESV)?

Peter seems to be just as concerned with what John is going to get as he is how his own life will end. While the source of this rivalry is uncertain, it continued through Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection.

Peter and John’s differences weren’t the only differences present in Jesus’ followers. They came from widely differing backgrounds. Matthew was a tax collector who worked for the

⁶ John does not name himself in his gospel.

Roman Empire. Simon was a Zealot, a group who actively sought to overthrow Roman rule. Many were rough fishermen and came from lower-class backgrounds. According to Luke 8:2–3, there were women who followed Jesus who were wealthy enough they provided for Jesus’ ministry “out of their means” (ESV). These women included “Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager,” (ESV) meaning they were a couple with wealth and influence.

This incredibly diverse group with varying backgrounds and ideologies changed the world. They preached from western Greece to Egypt to India. They stood before kings and boldly declared the gospel. All the eleven disciples gave their lives for Jesus’ sake, except for John, who was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching about Jesus. This varied group came together and fulfilled one mission; the one Jesus gave them. If the church is to fulfill the Great Commission—if *we* are to fulfill the Great Commission—we must follow the example of those who’ve gone before us. We must set aside our differences—ideological, sociological, political, or personal—and focus on the mission Jesus gave to us. We may never agree on some important things in life, but we should be able to agree that you and I are called to make disciples of all nations. If we focus on the one thing that Jesus calls us to do, all the little things we might think are important will fade into the background.

Reflection

1. How have differences (ideological, sociological, political, or personal) hindered you from fulfilling the Great Commission?
2. How can you overcome those differences?
3. Who can be your partner in making disciples? How will you start?

Week 2

Day 1

What if God prayed for you? What would that look like? What would burden the Creator of the universe so much that He would take the time to pray specifically for you? It can be an overwhelming thought to consider what the Eternal One would pray when He thought about you, your life, and your experiences. However, we do not have to guess when we answer this question. The answer is recorded in John 17.

In what is commonly known as the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus, we catch a glimpse of Jesus' conversation with the Father. It takes place on the night of the Last Supper. Judas has left to betray Jesus. The disciples share a Passover meal together. Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper, a way for His followers to remember His pending death, burial, and resurrection until He comes again. He tells the disciples a little bit about the future. He teaches a lot about the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells the disciples what it means to love and follow Him. And then He prays.

The prayer is notable for what it includes and what it excludes. It includes a lot of prayer concerning the glory of the Father. Jesus intends for God's glory to be evident in His life and death. It excludes any thought about removing the disciples from the world. Jesus prays out loud, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15, ESV). I know I do not spend a lot of time clarifying what I am *not* praying for. Why would Jesus? There is a simple answer, namely, they had a job to do. Remember the Great Commission? The disciples could not fulfill it if they were no longer in the world. Jesus is reminding them of the important work that lies ahead of them by specifically excluding their departure from the world as He prays.

Jesus prays for some other things for His disciples that we will uncover as this week continues. But Jesus makes another important clarification, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20, ESV). Jesus says that He is not simply praying for those in the room that night. He is not just praying for the eleven who would stand on a mountain in Galilee and receive the Great Commission. He is not only praying for the ones who would travel the known world and give their lives for His sake. He is praying for all those who would believe in Him through their words. This prayer includes you and me. We have believed because Peter, John, and Matthew wrote their experiences down. We have believed because Paul’s life was changed by Jesus, he learned from the apostles, and he wrote letters to churches. The testimony of those who saw Jesus in the flesh has led us to believe.

So, Jesus prayed for you two thousand years ago. On the night he was going to be betrayed, arrested, put on trial, and crucified He made time to name you in his prayer. Which means we should pay attention to what He prays for. His prayer for you and me boils down to two things: unity and mission. When this prayer is fulfilled in his church today, the gates of hell cannot stand against it. How should we live this out? How can we be the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer?

Reflection

1. How are God’s glory, the Great Commission, and the church’s unity linked?
2. What words of the disciples help you to believe in Jesus?
3. Take a moment and thank Jesus for thinking specifically of you. How does the personalization of Jesus’ prayer change the way you view John 17?

Day 2

Churches often get a bad reputation for experiencing conflict and infighting. Oftentimes, this reputation is deserved. Many people, maybe including you, have been hurt by believers who treat others poorly because they have a different viewpoint. It is not hard to find YouTube videos created by Christians who are denouncing other Christians because they do not appreciate their doctrine, philosophy, or approach. There are whole channels dedicated to tearing down other Christians. There are believers who have ministries built on “taking a stand” against other ministries or teachers. And there are ministries that are built on “taking a stand” against them. It is pretty apparent that the same discord and strife that is present in culture is present in the church. I am not certain that is what Jesus wants.

In fact, Jesus prayed just the opposite in John 17. As we consider a few passages from this incredible prayer, remember that Jesus is not just praying for those in the room. Jesus is not simply caring for His closest friends on earth. He specifically prays for all believers everywhere when He says, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (John 17:20, ESV). As noted yesterday, Jesus’ prayer comes down to two big topics: unity and mission.

Look at how often Jesus prays for the unity of his church.

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one (John 17:11, ESV).

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... (John 17:20–21, ESV).

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... (John 17:22–23, ESV).

The God of the universe prays for the unity of His people three times in this short prayer. You probably repeat prayers for things that are important to you—a pressing health need, a situation for which you need wisdom, the spiritual state of a loved one. Jesus’ prayer was no different. When He prayed, he prayed for the things that were most important to him, including the unity of His people. As we will see in the days to come, we do not have unity because we agree on every aspect of life; we can have unity because we agree on the most important aspects of life—who Jesus is and what He calls us to do.

Reflection

1. Have you been hurt by other believers? How did that affect your view of Jesus? Of the church? Of yourself?
2. Have you hurt another believer in the name of “taking a stand?” What can you do to move toward unity?
3. How does agreeing on who Jesus is and what He wants us to do allow believers to have unity, even if they do not agree on everything?

Day 3

Not to get all metaphysical on you, but we are bound by time. We put everything into the perspective of beginnings and endings. We book airline tickets based on when they take off and land, at least if everything goes to plan. When things do not go to plan and departure and arrival times change, frustration mounts because our timing changes. A quick glance at your smart speaker history shows how bound by time we are. “Alexa, what time is it?” is followed closely by, “Alexa, what’s the weather,” because we want to know what we can accomplish that day. Toss in the commands to start timers and it is easy to see beginnings, endings, and circumstances dominating our thought life.

This temporal perspective can create angst in relationships sometimes. As we consider our opinions in light of the opinions of the people around us, we can get concerned that our perspective is losing while others are winning. Since we only have a limited amount of time in these relationships, we are tempted to seek to win an argument and be proven right rather than focus on something more meaningful and lasting. Jesus’ prayer in John 17 gives us some insight into Jesus’ perspective on His most important relationship and how that empowered His mission. If we can develop the same perspective as Jesus, maybe that will empower our mission as well.

Jesus, as the second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, had a perfect relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit for all eternity. We will never be able to grasp fully this (a symptom of our finiteness) but grasping what we can helps us to understand how Jesus’ mission was empowered by the unity of the Trinity. Here are some things Jesus prays that give us insights into Jesus’ eternal perspective.

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.
And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had
with you before the world existed (John 17:4–5, ESV).

Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one (John 17:11, ESV).

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... (John 17:22–23, ESV).

Jesus' perspective reaches much farther than ours. He understands His relationship with the Father not in terms of time, but eternity. And, for all of eternity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have been perfectly united in purpose: increasing the glory of God through accomplishing the mission of providing salvation for His people.

That purpose was empowered by the unity of the Trinity. Jesus realized this through His eternal perspective. You can see this as John introduces the scene of the Last Supper.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given him all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper (John 13:1–3, ESV).

Jesus did not allow temporal perspectives, betrayal, or pain to derail His mission; rather, He was empowered by the eternal unity of the Trinity. As the ones following Jesus, we should follow His example and allow our perspective to be stretched beyond beginnings and endings, schedules, and timers. Then, Jesus' prayer can be fulfilled in us: "That they may be one, just as you Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21, ESV).

Reflection

1. How have you allowed your perspective to be too short?

2. How has a shortened perspective impacted your ability to fulfill the Great Commission?

3. How has a temporal perspective impacted your relationships, either with believers or with people who need to know Jesus?

Day 4

Remember the quote by Andy Stanley, “Jesus is the hope of the world, and the local church is the vehicle of expressing that hope to the world.” Yes, Jesus is the hope of the world. Yes, the local church is the vehicle of expressing that hope. One of those statements is unconditional. Jesus is the hope of the world. That will never change. The One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (cf. Heb. 13:8) has always been and will always be the hope of the world. The other statement, however, is conditional. While the local church is the vehicle of expressing the hope of Jesus, there are times it succeeds and times it fails at its responsibility. Sometimes the church does a great job of communicating hope. Other times it fails, sometimes spectacularly. What makes the difference? Why does it succeed at times and fail at others?

Once again, Jesus’ prayer in John 17 provides the answer to these questions. Since the content of Jesus’ prayer for you and me focuses largely on unity and mission, it’s not surprising that He ties the unity of His followers with people understanding that He was sent by God to be the hope of the world.

For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me (John 17:8, ESV).

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 (John 17:20–21, ESV).

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 17:23, ESV).

O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me (John 17:25, ESV).

Jesus, the One sent by God, will always be the hope of the world perfectly. He fulfilled his mission perfectly. He saves His people perfectly. He will bring His people home perfectly. His

followers, on the other hand, are imperfect sometimes. We can be divisive. We can focus on our own agendas rather than on our mission. When we allow our differences to overtake the Great Commission, we do not express the hope of the world well. Jesus' followers need to be one, so that the world will know that Jesus came to be their perfect hope.

Reflection

1. Have you seen disunity hinder the church's ability to express the hope of the world? What happened?
2. How can Jesus' followers express His hope more perfectly?
3. How are the unity of the Trinity and the unity of the church related?

Day 5

Jesus came to earth to accomplish everything the Father had for Him to do. He did that perfectly and returned to heaven. The completion of His mission was the single-most important moment in all of eternity as He lived, died, and rose again. Just before completing that mission, securing salvation for God's people, He prayed for his followers. In this prayer, He compares His mission with the mission that He is giving to His followers, which He'll give to them about a month and a half after dying on the cross. In this comparison, the two themes of Jesus' prayer, unity, and mission, come together. The fulfillment of this confluence is what allows Jesus' promise in Matthew to come to pass—"I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not stand against it" (16:18, ESV).

As we've seen, Jesus ties the unity of the Trinity with the fulfillment of his own mission to bring salvation to the world. Over and over, he reflects on the oneness seen in the Trinity, praying things such as

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (John 17:4–5, ESV).

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one (John 17:11, ESV).

Jesus acknowledges that His mission was empowered by the unity of the Trinity. The relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was the driving force behind Jesus accomplishing all that the Father sent Him to do. Each person of the Trinity was united in executing the plan for salvation that had been set in motion before the world was created (Eph. 1:4, ESV).

Jesus doesn't stop by reflecting on His own mission, however. He prays about our mission, the Great Commission.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:15–17, ESV).

Do not miss the enormity of what Jesus prayed. God the Father sent God the Son empowered by God the Holy Spirit to accomplish His eternal plan for mankind. Jesus says He's sending you and me in the same way. What does this mean? First, we are being sent by Jesus to fulfill our role in bringing salvation to the world. For Jesus this meant living, dying, and raising again. For us it means as we are going, we make disciples by pointing them to Jesus, teaching them about Him, and helping them to experience transformational life-change. Second, mission fulfillment and unity cannot be separated. For Jesus, His mission was affirmed and empowered by the unity of the Trinity. For us, our mission is affirmed and empowered by the unity of Jesus' followers. If Jesus' church is divided because of political ideologies or cultural differences, we will do well fulfilling the mission to which we've been called. That prevents us from accomplishing the third and overarching way Jesus sends us as He was sent. The point of fulfilling the mission, both Jesus' and ours, is God's glory. Jesus prayed, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:5, ESV). By going as Jesus came, by having unity as the Trinity is united, and making disciples as Jesus made disciples, we glorify God and fulfill our mission by pointing people to Him.

Reflection

1. In what ways should the church have the same unity as the Trinity?

2. How is your mission similar to Jesus'?

3. How does disunity among Jesus' followers hinder us from fulfilling our mission?

Week 3

Day 1

Hopefully, by now you've realized the importance of the church's mission. Jesus taught about it multiple times between His resurrection and ascension, using precious limited time on earth to communicate about what He wanted His followers to do after He left. Jesus prayed about it on the night He was betrayed. As the Creator of the universe prepared to go to the cross to secure salvation for His people, He was so burdened for His followers, including you and me, that He lifted this concern to the Father. While we remain on earth, our central thought should be on how we are fulfilling the Great Commission. In that way, we emulate Jesus and His concern for His mission for His church.

Unfortunately, Jesus' concern for unity often goes unnoticed in the church today. We are prone to fight and argue. We hold political ideologies so tightly that we are dismissive of believers who do not see the world the same way we do. We, either intentionally or unintentionally, subject our theology and practice of Christianity to our political or cultural ideals. This was plainly seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, with disputes about how the church should react, the ways we should interact with governmental authorities, and what was important for the church to do. As one pastor put it, "We found that our people were much more politically disciplined than biblically disciplined."

What does it look like when Jesus' church doesn't get along? What happens when believers allow their political ideologies to take over the way they view the world, the way they treat people outside the church, the way they treat other believers, or even the way they worship? To be honest, it doesn't look good. The outcomes are not positive, either for the church or the world that needs the church to express the hope of Jesus correctly and adequately. This week,

we'll explore what some of the writers of the New Testament had to say about the impact of disunity on a congregation and its ability to be obedient to the Great Commission. Along the way, we'll see the importance of focusing on Jesus' mission for His church rather than political or ideological convictions, no matter how deeply held.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth extensively about divisions. They had multiple factions that caused the church problems serious enough that Paul addressed it several times in serious terms.

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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers (1 Cor. 1:1–11, ESV).

James addressed the impact of disunity as well.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you (Jas. 4:1, ESV)?

Realizing the damage caused by disunity will help you and me do what we can to follow Jesus in fulfilling the Great Commission together.

Reflection

1. How have you seen political tensions spill over into the church?
2. Are you more biblically or politically disciplined, and why?
3. How can you focus on biblical discipleship more?
4. Pray that God would reveal the ways in which your thoughts about church and spirituality have been influenced by ideologies rather than the other way around.

Day 2

It's hard to miss the ideological divide today. If you've missed it, you can do one of the following to find it: open a social media app, turn on the television, go on the internet, talk to someone who isn't yourself. You know, go ahead and talk to yourself and you might find an ideological divide there as well. It's tempting to think that we live in unprecedentedly divisive times, with rancor and discord everywhere we turn. While it may feel that way, we must remember that ever since Adam blamed Eve for eating the fruit, there has been division among us. That's one reason the apostle Paul spent so much time writing about division and unity to a church in a city called Corinth. Reading these passages, you'd be tempted to think that they had found an early version of Twitter that had filled their feeds with vitriol. What you find is that we do not need Twitter, Facebook, Fox News, or MSNBC to create division; we're pretty good at that on our own.

In the two letters in the New Testament written to the Corinthians contained in the New Testament, Paul addresses ideological differences right from the beginning. This may indicate that the primary issue in the church was the presence of factions and strife.

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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul (1 Cor. 10:10–13, ESV)?

It's interesting to note that the Greek word translated "divisions" in this passage doesn't necessarily have a negative meaning. It can simply imply a difference of opinion. However, when taken to the extreme, those differences of opinion can create destructive divisions. In the church, this happens when our ideologies take a higher priority than our theology. This was the

case in Corinth. Paul calls out those who were claiming to follow Apollos or Peter. There was nothing wrong with Apollos' or Peter's theology. In fact, Paul commends both men later in his letter, saying the Corinthians would do well to listen to them (cf. 1 Cor. 15:11, 16:12).

The problem is not that we have different opinions. The problem is not that we have different ways of viewing the world. The problem is not that we Do not all think the same way. The church is supposed to have people from all different walks of life in it. The fact that Paul had to write so much about unity is a reflection of diversity in the body of Christ. However, when we allow our focus to shift to earthly ideologies at the expense of unity in the church, we are acting less like followers of Jesus and more like followers of men. Paul calls out the Corinthians for this unspiritual perspective.

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human (1 Cor. 3:3–4, ESV)?"

Pay attention to two things here. First, disunity in the Corinthian church was caused by believers not accepting other believers who followed the teaching of a different teacher. Second, this disunity happened because believers weren't acting spiritually. Paul's question, "are you not...behaving only in a human way?" should cause you and I to step back, reflect on our words and attitudes toward other believers, and seek the unity of Jesus' church through truly focusing on what's important to him: unity, mission, and God's glory.

Reflection

1. Why do you think it's so easy to act in a human way rather than spiritually?

2. How ideologically diverse is your local congregation?

3. How has diversity caused problems?

4. How has a lack of diversity caused problems?

5. How has “acting in a human way” crept into your treatment of other believers?

Day 3

“Why does this keep happening to me?” This was the exasperated cry of a believer whose church was experiencing severe disunity. She was traumatized by the stress, the discord, the disagreements, the backbiting, the politicking, the gossip, the factions, the nitpicking, the canceling, the broken relationships, the spiritual deadness, the lack of worship, the absence of fellowship...you get the point. Things were not going well, and everybody knew it. Nearly in tears, this believer communicated how difficult it was to experience this in Jesus’ church. However, in many ways, she was in the middle of the dispute that caused the disunity to arise. Then she added a couple of sentences that have stuck with me throughout my ministry journey. She said, “This is the third church in a row I’ve attended that split! Why does this keep happening to me?”

I do not think this believer thought she was actively causing disunity. However, while passionately arguing for her ideology, she would appear oppositional and dismissive of believers who had a different viewpoint. Pain, frustration, and disillusionment were the result for many in this congregation. Conversations were heated. Meetings were contentious. No one was having fun. Disunity never leads to pleasant things. Watch for the descriptors in the following passages.

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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers (1 Cor. 1:10–11, ESV).

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving in only a human way (1 Cor 3:3, ESV)?

What causes quarrels and what causes fights within you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel (Jas. 4:1–2, ESV).

Quarreling, divisions, jealousy, strife, fights, war, murder, and coveting is not a recipe for fun. Does this sound like a place you want to dwell? However, many of us do not realize the way we act, the words we use, and the attitudes of our heart are what cause the environments that cause us pain, sorrow, and disappointment. This is not unique to our situation today; it was the same in the churches that received Paul's and James' letters. The causes of disunity are not outside of us. Rather, they come from within. James writes about the passions and attitudes "within you." When you think about the disunity you see in the church and the unpleasant environment it creates, Do not immediately start blaming everyone around you who sees things differently. Instead, take a step back and examine the passions within you. You might find that you have a role in the very thing you dislike, which means part of the solution lies in you.

Reflection

1. Have you ever felt like the believer experiencing disunity and wondering why? Where was your focus during that time?
2. Why is it easy for us to ignore our role in disunity?
3. How can you communicate passion in a way that isn't oppositional or dismissive?

Day 4

The gospel focuses a lot on reconciliation. God reconciled sinners to Himself when Jesus died on the cross and rose again. Those sinners were far from God; they're described as dead, enemies of God, and separated from Him. However, through Jesus, believers are made alive, friends of God, and brought near to Him. This is the most incredible reconciliation possible. Those who offended an infinitely perfect God, meaning their offense was infinitely objectionable and painful, are brought into the family of the God they wronged. This is the heart of the plan of salvation. This is the outworking of the eternal plan of God. It cost the Father the life of the Son to make this happen. It would be an understatement to say that reconciliation is important to God. He is in the business of bringing those who are far apart close together.

This doesn't simply happen between God and sinners. It happens between sinners and sinners. Those who lived in opposition and animosity toward each other are brought into the same family. Those who have different backgrounds and histories become one. Paul describes shows how our reconciliation with God and our reconciliation with each other are accomplished through Jesus.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph. 2:12–16, ESV).

We were once separated from God and each other. Paul is writing specifically about Jews and Gentiles here, but even those completely oppositional groups were brought together through the

death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. God loves reconciliation. God loves unity. He paid an incredible price to make it happen.

So how does He feel about the times His people do not live that out? How does he react when His people allow ideologies to separate what He has brought together? You might be able to guess. As Calvin Coolidge said when asked about what a preacher said about sin, “He’s against it.” Several of the passages that address disunity show God’s displeasure with it. In fact, those passages do not stop at describing his displeasure, they describe his judgment. James writes about the root of disunity within us and describes God’s attitude.

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?... You adulterous people, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (Jas. 4:1, 4, ESV).

God has done everything possible to reconcile sinners to Himself and sinners to sinners.

However, we often fail to act spiritually, using the tactics of the world to advance our ideologies.

When that causes disunity, we act as enemies of God as we are actively subverting what He has accomplished through Jesus’ sacrifice.

Paul is actually a little harsher in the way he describes God’s response to disunity in Jesus’ church. In an often-misunderstood passage, Paul writes

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16–17, ESV).

This passage is misunderstood in that people connect the temple referred to with 1 Corinthians 6:

“Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19, ESV). This connection has led some to

believe that suicide is an unforgivable sin, because God will destroy the one who destroys the temple. However, that’s not what Paul is writing about in 1 Corinthians 3. Instead of looking

forward three chapters, Paul is referring to something he was writing earlier. He got distracted in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. That’s an aside describing how one builds his or her life on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Paul was distracted because he wrote about the Corinthians, “For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9, ESV).

When Paul writes about the destruction of a temple, he’s not writing about an individual’s body. Paul is writing about the Corinthian church, the one that has jealousy and strife because people were holding to ideologies rather than focusing on unity and mission. That disunity was destroying the church, which would bring the judgment of God. If God values reconciliation so highly and judges disunity so harshly, shouldn’t we place the same value on unity? If we care about Jesus’ church and mission, unity should be one of our highest priorities.

Reflection

1. What are the implications of reconciliation of sinners and God? Of sinners and sinners?
2. How does the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles relate to the reconciliation in churches today?
3. What might be some of the ways God’s judgment of disunity is seen today?

Day 5

Disunity destroys. Surveys of church leaders show it. Surveys of church members show it. Anecdotes show it. Experiences show it. Conversations show it. Disunity hinders the most important thing the church is supposed to do, fulfill the Great Commission. It has caused churches to take the energy they need to do what Jesus has called them to do and use it to address conflict, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness instead. Disunity causes pain in congregations, making it difficult for believers to find fellowship, experience worship, and be disciplined. It has damaged congregations, with people leaving churches because they disagree with the ideological stances of church leaders or the ideological stances of other church members. Disunity causes pain in individuals, as they experience the stress, disappointment, and disillusionment that come when relationships are broken.

This doesn't have to be the case. From the beginning of this study, we've seen that God calls all believers everywhere to the same purpose. We are supposed to glorify Him by making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We're supposed to teach them everything that Jesus commanded us. And Jesus promises to be with us always as we do that. When we focus on that mission, ideological differences can begin to fade. It doesn't mean that we do not have sincerely held beliefs or view the world in a way we think is correct; it means that the differences we have can fade when we focus less on our differences and more on the mission that Jesus has called us to fulfill.

This takes more than we have within us. We want to be right. We want our perspectives, our viewpoints, to be proven correct. We want the satisfaction of being on the winning side of the argument, so we will naturally argue with all our might. In and of ourselves, we'll fight for the winning spot and be oppositional and dismissive of others along the way. That's why Jesus

prayed for us on His way to face the most desperate events anyone has ever faced, so desperate that thinking of them made Him sweat blood. In the face of that, He prayed for you and me to have unity and fulfill our mission. The God of the universe cared so much for our unity that He did not pray for escape from the incredible pain, suffering, and separation He was about to face. Rather, He prayed for His followers to get along, to not let differences divide them, and—most importantly—to have the unity that would empower them to do what He called them to do.

God cares so much about our unity that He has a strong reaction to disunity. He cares so much about His church that He will destroy those who attempt to destroy the body. Scripture, over and over, addresses the wrongness of fighting over ideologies and the rightness of uniting in the gospel. When believers understand this more and more and unite for the sake of the gospel, the church of Jesus Christ will be an unstoppable force for good, both temporal and eternal. The church will continue to move forward, making disciples of all nations as it goes. And the gates of hell will not be able to withstand its advance. May God give you and me the eyes of faith to see that God has so much more in store for us than winning an ideological argument. He wants to change lives through us. He wants to change eternities through us. He wants to build his church through us. Let's do that, together.

Reflection

May God bless you as you embark on a journey of seeking unity in the face of disunity. My hope and prayer for you is that you would recognize the enormity of what God has called us to do and be willing to set aside every difference possible to do it. Take a moment and reflect on what you've learned and consider how you'll seek to bring unity instead of disunity by focusing on the mission God has for us rather than the differences that divide us.

Appendix G

Three-Week Sermon Series

United In Mission
Matthew 28:18–20**Intro**

There's division in our society almost everywhere you look.

- During the 2016 election, 16% of respondents stopped talking to a friend or family member because of politics
- Cultural issues are pushing people apart
- Online speech is becoming increasingly vitriolic
 - It seems like you find outrage everywhere you look
 - It just takes the click of one button to communicate to everyone you know how upset you are
 - Name-calling and insults are everywhere
- Not only are the sides becoming more polarized, but they also see each other as an existential threat to the country, democracy, and our way of life

The church should be different.

- It's God's chosen instrument to bring Him glory
- It's God's chosen instrument to further His kingdom
- It's God's chosen instrument to give people hope through changed lives and eternities

But often, it's not.

- Talking about disunity in churches, Russell Moore (the public theologian at *Christianity Today*) said, "***I Do not know of a single church that's not affected by this.***"
- Many churches are hindered in their mission by disunity

How can the church hope to find unity?

- If we have different politics
- If we have different ideologies

Only through listening to a voice that transcends all of us. What does Jesus have to say about unity? What does Jesus have to say about two different groups coming together?

- That's ultimately what God does—reconciles
 - Sinners to Himself
 - Sinners to sinners
- We must listen to that third voice—Jesus', not yours or mine—to be able to find unity.

This week, we'll see how the mission that Jesus gives to His church can also give unity to His church.

We'll see this in two passages. In these, Jesus describes His church and makes two incredible promises to His church.

1. I Will—Matthew 16:13–20

- Jesus promises to build His church
 - Whenever we think about the church, whether it's this church or the church around the world, we must remember that it's Jesus' church
 - He is *super* possessive of the church
 - He doesn't say "the church"
 - He doesn't say "a church"
 - He doesn't say "your church"
 - He says "***My church***"
 - Which means we must pay attention to
 - What He says we should be
 - What He says we should do
 - What He says we should hope for
 - What He says we should focus on
 - We can't think this is about us
 - What we like
 - What makes us feel comfortable
 - A place for us to hang out with people who think like us
 - Because it's Jesus' idea
 - He created it
 - He redeemed it
 - He empowers it
- Jesus describes how His church will be built
 - In the midst of confusion
 - The confusion in culture we see today is nothing new
 - People were confused about who Jesus was
 - The answers to the question "Who do people say I am" all underestimated Jesus
 - They give some respect and honor
 - They fall short of who He actually is
 - Some answers did not even make sense
 - ***You're John the Baptist***
 - Jesus and John were in the same room together...
 - Jesus and His disciples had traveled to Caesarea Philippi
 - They had been rejected by the Jewish religious and political leaders
 - Those leaders had wanted to kill Jesus for a while
 - ***Seen in Matthew 12***
 - It looked like the mission was failing
 - How could Jesus be the Messiah if significant people opposed Him?
 - How could Jesus bring liberty if they had to hide?

- In the midst of confusion, Peter declares the truth
 - The church is built on the statement of who Jesus is
 - The Christ
 - The One Israel had been waiting for
 - The Son of the Living God
 - The One who cares about His people
 - The One who is reconciling sinners to Himself and sinners to sinners
 - The One who sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world
- What about the gates?
 - They can't resist
 - The picture isn't the church huddling while Satan attacks it
 - The picture is the church moving forward, expanding the kingdom

What does that look like? How does the church move forward?

To understand this, we're going to look at a few of Jesus' final words recorded in Matthew.

Matthew 28:18–20

2. The Mission

- The mission of the church is to make disciples
 - It would be great if we could all grumble “Amen,” close in prayer, and beat the Presbyterians to lunch
 - The problem is there a lot of misunderstanding about what Jesus meant by “make disciples”
 - Just like misunderstanding what Jesus meant when He said, “The gates of hell will not prevail against it”
 - Nothing good comes from these misunderstandings
 - Churches divide
 - Churches close
 - Churches lose their impact
- A disciple is a follower of Jesus
 - How does someone become a Jesus follower?
 - They come to Him—”Baptizing them”
 - They learn about Him—”Teaching them”
 - They look like Him—”To obey everything I've commanded you”
 - A disciple is someone who's committed their life to following Jesus
 - That's how **Acts 6:7** uses the word
 - That's what Jesus calls us to do
 - **Mark 8:34**
 - **John 12:26**
 - **Matthew 19:21**

3. You're a Part of this Mission

- Notice the “all” language—it's shows that this call is universal for believers

- All authority
 - Just as He was sent by the Father on a mission, He's sending you
- All nations
- Observe all
- With you always, to the end of the age
 - The age is still going on, but the 11 disciples aren't around anymore
 - The mission is given to you!
- This must be your focus as a disciple yourself
 - There's an important commentary on the disciples when they came to see Jesus on the mountain
 - **Matthew 28:16–17**
 - They all worshipped; some doubted
 - These are the 11 disciples
 - Judas has betrayed Jesus and killed himself
 - Some people try to include others in this group so that none of the 11 doubted, but there's no indication there's anyone but Jesus' closest friends and followers here
 - How could they doubt?
 - They had seen the risen Jesus
 - In a closed room
 - Jesus had invited Thomas to touch His wounds
 - Jesus had cooked them breakfast!
 - They were looking at the risen Jesus right now!
 - The word used here doesn't imply unbelief, but hesitation
 - It literally means, "two stances"
 - They were caught between standing before the risen God of the universe and their own plans and ideas
 - Which would they choose?
 - Their own ideas would separate them
 - Jesus' mission and plans would unite them

Conclusion

How can you be a part of the mission that brings unity? How can you be a part of making disciples?

- Go
 - This only command in the Great Commission is to make disciples
 - It isn't necessarily a command to leave where you are and go somewhere else
 - One commentator said, "Since you are going anyway..."
 - You are always going
 - Are you making disciples?
 - When is the last time you had a spiritual conversation?
 - Not about politics or ideology, but about Jesus
 - When is the last time you led someone to Jesus
 - When's the last time you even prayed for someone specifically to come to Him?

- Give
 - You can support missionaries around the world who are making disciples
 - But...do not outsource your mission!
 - It's easy to think that if you give some cash, you're fulfilling the Great Commission
 - You need to be active
 - Remember all, all, all, always
- Get after it!
 - Do not wait
 - Do not sit still
 - Do not just pass time

There are some gates that need storming. As we do that together, differences become smaller.

A Prayer for Unity
John 17

Intro

Think about the last time you prayed. What did you pray for?

- That shows what is most important to you
- That shows what burdens you
- That shows what you really want to happen

In **John 17**, we have a front-row seat, listening to Jesus' prayer. The One who designed prayer prays for us to hear. We should take note of what He says and how it applies to us.

There are three sections to Jesus' prayer.

- In verses 1–8, Jesus prays for Himself and about His relationship with the Father
 - We see Jesus asking to be glorified so He might glorify the Father
 - We see Jesus asking that His mission would be fulfilled
- In verses 9–19, Jesus begins to pray for His disciples
 - He prays specific things for them knowing that He, their supporter, and protector, is about to be taken from them
- In verses 20–26, Jesus specifically includes you in His prayer—**John 17:20**
 - His primary concern for His church throughout the ages is unity

1. Jesus' Purpose and Your Purpose

- Jesus prays, “The hour has come”
 - Jesus had a definite sense of His purpose
 - He knew exactly why He was on earth and filtered every word and action through that purpose
 - Jesus used this phrase a few times
 - **John 2:4**—Wedding feast
 - **John 7:2–8**—Brothers wanting Jesus to go to Jerusalem to show who He was
 - Although this was more of a challenge than anything
 - Jesus had a single-minded focus
 - **Isaiah 50:4–9**
- Do you sense God's mission for your life?
 - Last week we saw that it's the Great Commission—make disciples
 - People coming to Jesus
 - People learning about Jesus
 - People looking like Jesus
 - Are you fulfilling that or just passing time until Jesus comes back?
 - Fulfilling your mission with friends and family
 - Do not be like the doubting disciples, who were torn between two options
 - Focusing on their own thoughts or on Jesus' thoughts for their lives

2. Jesus' Prays for Unity

- We often have a skewed view of unity
 - We think unity is “Be like me”
 - Vote like me, think like me, serve like me, worship like me, live like me
 - We ought to have differences
 - The fact that the New Testament is filled with commands to have unity means that there is room for differences
 - Those differences can be large
 - *“Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”—Henri Nouwen*
- Jesus shows the purpose of unity
 - Jesus doesn't want us to have unity so we can have great potlucks
 - Jesus says it's so “The world may know that you sent Me”
 - People would know His mission
 - To purchase salvation and glorify God
- As Jesus prays for unity, He ties our unity with our purpose
 - **John 17:21–23**
 - We exist to show the truth about who Jesus is
 - He is from God and is God
 - We point people to Him
 - So they come to Jesus
 - So they learn about Jesus
 - So they look like Jesus
- Our unity comes from our mission, not because we share the same background or ideas
 - We may have different upbringings
 - We may have different goals
 - We may serve God in different ways
 - We are all in Christ
- Our unity will go on forever
 - Jesus makes an incredible request in **John 17:24**
 - He prays that we'll be where He is
 - Someday we will be!
 - **Revelation 7:9–12**
 - Unity can only last forever if it's built on something eternal
 - Not politics
 - Not culture
 - It's built on Jesus and His mission for us
 - Remember the Great Commission? He's with us to the end of the age. And then we're in heaven with Him!

3. What Happens When Jesus' Prayer for Unity Is Answered?

- He sends us
 - “Go and make disciples of all nations”
 - Specifically seen in **John 17:18**
 - Jesus hints at it a couple of times
 - **John 17:15–16**

- Jesus identifies what He's *not* praying for
- While He's about to be taken out of the world, the disciples will be left to fulfill His mission
- **John 17:20–21**
 - The disciples will communicate who Jesus is and what He's done
 - People will believe their word
 - Including you!
- Will you go as Jesus sends?
 - To work, to school, to your family
- We will have a persuasive witness to the world
 - **John 17:21, 23**
 - The more deeply we know the Father and Jesus
 - Through His word—**John 17:8**
 - The more we are going to portray Who the Father and Jesus are
 - My response to God flows out of my knowledge of God
 - I know Him to be loving
 - I know Him to be trustworthy
 - I know Him to be holy
 - Will you portray who Jesus is?
- We will see God's glory
 - **John 17:22**
 - See and experience the beauty and majesty of God
 - Knowing Him more deeply
 - Knowing His presence
 - Seeing Him work in incredible ways
 - As we fulfill His mission
 - **John 14:12**

Conclusion

Ultimately, as we are united in the mission that Jesus gives us, God gets more glory

- **John 17:1, 5**
- Jesus did not live His life to glorify Himself
 - Even though He deserved it
 - He *was* God, after all
 - He would receive glory and worship
 - Remember the beginning of the Great Commission?
 - When the 11 came, they worshipped Him
- Instead, Jesus lived His life to glorify the Father
 - Showing what He's like
 - Loving, holy, and just
 - Through words *and* actions
- To live like Jesus did, we must give up the right to be selfish
 - Selfishness is the opposite of glorifying God
 - It may feel good at first
 - Its end is miserable

- Things won't always go our way
- People won't always agree with us
- People won't always treat you the way you think you should be treated
 - If you can honestly say, "Lord, no matter what happens to me, whether I live or die, whether I am treated fairly or unfairly, whether people agree with me or not, Lord, you be glorified," you will be set free from misery
- Living like Jesus did, fulfilling our mission and glorifying God, we can find true unity
 - It affirms Jesus' mission
 - It empowers our mission
 - It glorifies God
- How do you need to live in unity today?

What if We Do Not?
1 Corinthians 1 & 3; James 4:1–4

Intro

Study after study and conversation after conversation have shown that disunity is a real problem in churches across the country today.

- It causes stress on pastors and church leaders
 - A recent Barna survey showed that 38% of pastors have seriously considered leaving ministry altogether
 - Not just their church, but leaving ministry to go do something else
- It causes stress on congregations
 - There are few people who enjoy conflict
 - Broken relationships, angry conversations, and stressful interactions do not make for a pleasant worship experience...
- It keeps a church from fulfilling what God's called it to do
 - If people in a congregation are busy fighting with each other, they do not have the energy or motivation to fulfill the Great Commission
 - Churches that experience disunity are a drag on the name of Jesus in a community, making it harder to fulfill the Great Commission not just for them, but for other churches in the area

If these things are true—and they're statistically and anecdotally shown to be true—why do we keep fighting with each other? Why do we often let ideology, politics, and opinion separate the very thing that Jesus gave His life to bring together? And more importantly, what can we do to bring things back together so we're a picture of what Jesus wants.

- Jesus prayed that we would be one in **John 17**
 - Just as He and the Father are one
 - So that the world may know that He was sent by the Father for the work of reconciliation
- You can be the answer to Jesus' prayer!

This morning we'll see what the Bible has to say about the cause of disunity, the effect of disunity, and how to address disunity.

- As you hear the Word this morning, do not sit there thinking about how much other people need to hear this
 - Consider how much *you* need to hear this and listen to what the Word and the Spirit are saying about things you may need to change

1. The Cause

- We're divided when we put preference over people
 - The church in Corinth was clearly divided
 - Paul addresses disunity in **1 Corinthians 1 & 3**
 - The fact that Paul starts his letter addressing disunity may show that this was the primary issue facing this congregation.
 - Paul lists different teachers that people were following in **1 Corinthians 1:12**
 - Paul, Apollos, Cephas (or Peter)

- Jesus
 - This isn't as spiritual as it sounds
 - This group was claiming moral and spiritual superiority, claiming they did not need to listen to anyone
 - More than that, they strongly implied that people who listened to anyone teach was in the wrong
 - They weren't divided over false teaching or doctrine
 - The word Paul uses for divisions doesn't necessarily have a negative meaning
 - It can simply refer to a difference of opinion
 - Paul is probably using the word this way
 - He commends both Peter and Apollos later in **1 Corinthians**
 - Peter in **1 Corinthians 15:11** says that he and the apostles (including Peter) "Preach the same message"
 - Paul says he encouraged Apollos to visit Corinth in **1 Corinthians 16:12**
 - Paul's contention is that the church at Corinth was experiencing division over what teacher people liked
 - Much of the disunity in churches today isn't over false teaching or bad doctrine, but on political or ideological preferences
 - It's ok to have a preference—we all do—but it's not ok to choose that preference over people
- We're divided when we do not act spiritually
 - It's okay to have differences of opinion
 - As we've said several times in this series, if we were all supposed to look the same, there wouldn't be so many commands to be united
 - Those commands assume that we're going to be different
 - If we weren't different, we wouldn't need to be told to be united
 - It's not okay to act unspiritually
 - But that's exactly what happens when we put preference over people
 - Paul calls the Corinthians out on this in **1 Corinthians 3:3–4**
 - There's jealousy and strife
 - When the Corinthians are putting preference over people according to the teachers they're following, Paul says they're acting in a "human way"
 - He says that twice, emphasizing how important this thought is
 - Do not fall into the trap of thinking you are spiritual when really you're just concerned about getting your preference

2. The Effect

- Disunity creates an unpleasant atmosphere
 - Think about the times you've had strained relationships in church

- You may not have wanted to come to worship
 - It may have kept you from taking communion
 - You might have shopped at Walmart at 11:00 at night just to avoid the possibility of bumping into the person you're in conflict with
- Look at how the New Testament describes congregations in disunity
 - **1 Corinthians 1:11; 1 Corinthians 3:3; James 4:1–2**
 - Quarreling, divisions, jealousy, strife, fights, war, murder
 - *Sounds like a great place to hang out, right?*
- No one intends for this to happen
 - At the end of the book of Judges, there's a description of chaos
 - We tend to read this as, "Everyone did what they wanted to do"
 - Actually it says, "Everyone did *what was right* in their own eyes"
 - The result was still devastating
 - The same is true in the church
 - While our preferences often come from a good place, they can have an incredibly negative effect on a congregation
 - Hinders our ability to glorify God
 - Hinders our ability to fulfill the Great Commission
- Disunity ignores what God want to do through His people
 - God is in the business of bringing things together
 - That's why Jesus came, lived, died, and rose again
 - God reconciles sinners to Himself
 - God reconciles sinners to sinners
 - **Ephesians 2:12–16**
 - Jesus removed the division between Gentiles and Jews
 - Jesus removed the hostility between the two
 - When we put preferences over people, we actively work to undo what God has done through Jesus
 - Putting preference over people does two things in undoing what God has done
 - **James 4:1, 4**
 - It puts us at odds with each other
 - Quarrels and fights
 - It puts us at odds with God
 - We're thinking about ourselves, rather than what God wants
 - Passions are at war "within you"
 - Division and strife do not arise largely from outside influences but from within our own hearts.
 - When we act like the world—full of division over preferences—James says we make ourselves enemies of God
 - *I am not sure my preferences are worth that...*

3. How Do We Fix This?

- Paul hints at two solutions in **1 Corinthians 1:10–11**
- Put Jesus above your preferences

- Paul makes his appeal “by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ”
- Since He’s the head of the church, we should pay more attention to what He wants than to our own preferences
 - He died for the church
 - He’s the center of the church
 - The church was His idea
- Put people above your preferences
 - Jesus did not live, die, and raise from the dead to advance your ideology
 - Jesus lived, died, and rose from the dead to reconcile sinners to God and sinners to sinners
 - Those people that God loved so much that He sent His only Son for
 - You should love them as well
 - Paul refers to the Corinthians as brothers (or brothers and sisters) twice in this passage
 - It shows His affection and love for them
 - Even amid correcting their disunity, Paul put people over preference and modeled that for the Corinthians so they would do the same

Conclusion

Disunity in the church is a big deal.

- It hinders the mission of the church
- It doesn’t communicate the mission of Jesus
- It hurts believers and congregations

Let’s be people who put Jesus and people over our preferences.

- In that way God is glorified as His church pushes against the gates of hell!

Appendix H

Unity Covenant

Knowing that:

- The mission of the church, given by Jesus in the Great Commission, is to make disciples
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as the church's unity should reflect the unity within the Trinity
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as the church's unity affirms Jesus' mission to glorify the Father through seeking and saving the lost
- Unity in the church empowers it to fulfill the mission to which Jesus called it

I acknowledge and repent of the ways in which I have allowed ideological stances to create disunity within the body of Christ. These may include:

- Finding my identity in ideology rather than in Christ
- Confusing the expression of faith with the foundation of faith
- Rejecting a brother or sister in Christ due to differing political stances
- Placing more value on winning ideological arguments than on loving my brother or sister in Christ

I commit to:

- Praying for the unity of my church
- Praying for the mission of my church
- Praying for the leadership of my church
- Praying for my brothers and sisters who have different ideologies than I do
- Focusing on the mission of the church more than the mission of a political ideology

Today I covenant to keep God's commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all my heart and my soul (2 Kings 23:3).

Signature

Date

Appendix I

One-Day Presentation Speaking Notes

Intro

We live in a contentious time. Politics and ideology have divided culture in too many ways to count. Unfortunately, this has crept into the church as well.

- Well, crept might be a gentle way to put that...
- I was a pastor in Northern California during the COVID pandemic and the 2020 elections.
 - We decided to take what we saw as a balanced view
 - Balancing conservative and liberal approaches
 - Balancing medical advice with gathering
 - Balancing Romans 13 and Hebrews 10:25
- And it tore me apart
 - Those in the medical community in our church said we shouldn't be gathering at all.
 - The people who embody the rancor that has come to be equated with Shasta County thought said I was "bending the knee to a corrupt government."
 - I was accused of promulgating a lie for encouraging people to wear masks.
 - I was told I had a weak reading of Romans 13.
 - I was told that gathering at church was the most dangerous thing that one of our staff members did during the week.

I was often left asking myself...

How did we get here?

I think it all started in the culture, which is clearly divided.

- Politics
- Sexual identity
- Heightened disunity
 - In fact, Pew Research shows that Democrats are more left-leaning and Republicans more right-leaning than they were two decades ago. And both increasingly see each other as an existential threat to the nation.
 - *Jonathan Leeman*
- Ideology has taken root so deeply that it seems nothing else matters
 - Many people are willing to create their own reality to affirm their righteousness, ignoring facts, logic, and others' objections.
 - *Ed Stetzer*
- It should be different in the church.
 - As people rescued from the power of sin and death by the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, a group of believers should look different than the divided culture around them
 - What matters, therefore, is the reality of the interdependence that gives visibility to our catholicity. The form—that is, the institutional arrangement—that expresses our interdependence is valuable but

secondary. What is crucial is the effectiveness of how the gospel is lived out so that the gift and grace of God are apparent by the very fact that such a people exist.

- **Stanley Hauerwas**
- That difference empowers the people of God to fulfill what He's called them to do—make disciples, the core of the Great Commission
 - From the beginning, divisions have threatened the mission of the church. But it is also evident that from the beginning, followers of Christ have demonstrated that they can overcome divisions to preserve and strengthen the mission.
 - **Christena Cleveland**
- But often, it isn't
 - Unfortunately, conflict exists in the church just as it does in the world because it's easy to mistake ideology for spirituality.
 - By simply categorizing, we often create subcategories that detract from the more important, all-inclusive category of the body of Christ. Before we know it, whether people are pro-life or pro-choice, Calvinist or Arminian, or black or white is more important than whether they are part of the family of God.
 - **Ed Stetzer**
- When we look more like the divided culture than the united body of Christ, we are hindered in fulfilling our mission
 - And the outcome, I suggest, is at best an anemic capacity to respond to the gospel for the sake of the world.
 - **Walter Brueggemann**

The COVID pandemic revealed and accelerated what was already happening in churches across the country

- The equating of ideology with spirituality
- The divisiveness along ideological lines
 - For the most part, not conservative vs. liberal
 - Really, conservative vs. not quite as conservative
- Because crisis accelerates change

While it was shocking, what really happened was the superficial unity that many churches experience was revealed for what it is, a unity not based on fulfilling the Great Commission, but on the pragmatism of advancing a political or ideological agenda. At times, this can take the shape of religious or spiritual expression. But when things get difficult, what is at the foundation gets shown to be the most important. When that foundation is not the mission of the church, ideologically driven disunity is the result.

My hope today is to show the state of churches and pastors across our region. We'll see how much IDD is present in our churches and its impact. We'll see some clear correlations and some surprising lack of correlation. We'll draw some conclusions from the research. And then I'll offer a possible way forward.

Ground Rules

This is not to say which ideology is correct. The biblical mandates for unity presuppose that there will be differences among us.

- Difference can threaten unity, but unity cannot be catholic without difference—*Stanley Hauerwas*

This project focuses on the leadership component of addressing ideologically driven disunity. It does not address the spiritual component. This project presupposes the following:

- You have a leadership composed of believers
- You are trying to follow Jesus
- You are praying
 - As an individual
 - As a group
- You consider the Bible to be the guide for life and ministry

I started with presuppositions, most of which were borne out in the research.

- When I was surprised, however, I'll let you know

This is for addressing IDD in a congregation. Conversations outside the church or personal political activity fall outside the purpose of this project.

There is an overlap of biblical truth and ideology. The answer to the problem of IDD is not to discard biblical truth in search of unity. However, we must realize when we are conflating biblical truth and ideology.

- *Can a gay person hold babies in the nursery question*

You may find my thoughts unsatisfactory.

- I get it
 - At times, they're unsatisfactory to me!
- You may need to ask yourself, am I unsatisfied because of the answer or because of my ideology?

It will take time.

- These are not quick fixes
 - It took us a long time to get here
 - May not feel that way because crisis accelerated the change
 - It will take us a while to move toward unity
 - There will be pain
 - There will be conflict
 - There will be forward steps and back
 - But we must start now
 - *When's the best time to plant a tree?*

Biblical Foundations

- This won't be the longest section
 - Although, as I say that, I must remember I am a preacher at heart...

- There is much more detail and information in the devotional
 - You can get that on Amazon or on the project website
- **Matthew 16:13–18**
 - Jesus gives the incredible promise that He will build His church
 - It's to push against the gates of hell
 - The picture is different than most conservative believers hold
 - The church huddled while Satan, most often seen in the aspects of culture we do not agree with, battering the church, but the church doesn't falter.
 - The opposite is true
 - The church is moving forward, the kingdom is expanding, and hell can't stop it
 - Based on the church's focus on Him
 - He is the Christ, the Son of the living God
 - As we focus on who He is and what He's done, the church should move forward.
 - Jesus is possessive of the church.
 - I will build *My* church.
 - As church leaders, we should always remind people that the church doesn't belong to them, it belongs to Jesus.
 - He's the One who gets to determine what the church is supposed to do and what it's supposed to stand for
- **Matthew 28:18–20**
 - Make disciples
 - This is our only mission
 - It may take different forms in different ministry contexts, but the core of our mission is to make disciples
 - There's a misunderstanding of what this means
 - People bring their misunderstandings based on their ideologies to this statement.
 - Largely thinking that making disciples is primarily about the transfer of information.
 - I know things about Jesus, you need to know them as well
 - There are three aspects to making disciples.
 - Baptizing them
 - The church is supposed to make converts.
 - Just as Jesus called people who weren't following Him, we are supposed to reach those who aren't following Jesus.
 - *Roy Gruber's doctoral project*
 - Teaching them
 - This *is* the transfer of information.
 - People need to know the One they're following.
 - To observe everything
 - The goal of making disciples isn't simply to win converts or to teach.
 - It must include looking more like Jesus.

- Making disciples must include all three
 - People coming to Christ
 - People learning about Christ
 - People looking more like Christ
- **John 17**
 - Jesus prays for the unity of the church throughout the ages
 - Those who will believe through their word—**John 17:20**
 - Echoes the end of the Great Commission—**Matthew 28:20**
 - Our unity affirms His mission and empowers ours

So what did we find out about our churches?

- 22 churches participated in this action research project
 - One characteristic of an action research project is to bring value to the stakeholders and participants
 - This isn't intended to simply be information about disunity
 - The purpose of the information is to help address it
 - Another characteristic is an action research project is restricted to a defined group
 - In this case, churches in the Rocky Mountain Church Network
 - An association of 48 churches
- That represents 46% of RMCN congregations

Data Concerning Congregations

- Ministry Context
 - 54.5% Rural/45.5% Suburban
 - We have churches in urban settings in Denver, but for various reasons, they did not participate.
 - Each of the four Rocky Mountain states were represented.
- Congregational size
 - There is a wide range of sizes represented in the project.
 - *Keynote Slide*
 - This range of sizes and ministry context gives a clearer picture of the presence and impact of IDD.
- Congregational age
 - The churches represented in the project have been around a long time.
 - Average and median age is around 88 years
 - Youngest congregation 24 years
 - This reflects the lack of church planting
 - Something we hope to change
- Kingdom Impact
 - I asked about professions of faith and baptisms
 - Then realized we had ranges of sizes as opposed to specific
 - I assigned an average size for each range
 - Using that metric, churches had an average of .04 professions of faith per attender
 - For every 100 attenders, churches had 4 professions of faith in the past month
 - The figures for baptisms were nearly identical

Data Concerning Pastors

- Tenure of pastors
 - This will be an important statistic later
 - Average of 11.2 years (median of 7.5)
 - Shortest 6 months, longest 35 years
- Education of pastors
 - 50% have a Master's
 - Two have Bachelor's
 - One has a Doctorate
 - The rest are scattered with some master's or doctorate
- Political leaning
 - Project participants identified their political leaning at an average of 2.2 with 1 being "Very Conservative" and 5 being "Very Liberal."

Data Concerning Presence and Impact of IDD

Most churches in RMCN have experienced IDD in the past 12 months

- 59.1%, with most giving it a 3–4 on the scale of severity (1 being worst)
 - None gave it a 1
- 72.7% said the COVID-19 pandemic worsened disunity
 - With an average of 3.4 on the severity scale
- 54.5% indicated the 2020 election worsened IDD
 - However, the respondents said the impact was less than currently

Most churches in RMCN indicated IDD hindered their ability to fulfill the Great Commission

- 54.5%

Data Concerning Impact of IDD on Pastors and Church Leadership

- 77.3% of participants reported stress caused by IDD
 - This is 31% higher than the presence of IDD
- The number is similar for church leadership: 72.7%
- Church leadership has not experienced IDD to the same degree
 - 27.3%, with an average impact of 4.3
- Church staff even less
 - 18.2% with an average impact of 4.4

Correlations in Data from Initial Survey

There was a surprising lack of correlations.

- Some because there wasn't much difference in responses from the participants
 - *Sotierology chart*
 - *Preaching style chart*
- Some had difference in responses, but no correlation to the presence or impact of IDD
 - I used Pearson's Correlation Coefficient formula to find correlation between two sets of data.
 - Largely comparing one variable to the variable of the impact of IDD

- I was anticipating the more professions of faith and baptisms, the less the church would experience IDD
 - Because they were more on mission
- However, this was not the case.
 - They both had no or negligible correlation.
- The same was true looking at the political activity of the participant, the size of the congregation, or the socioeconomic status of the congregation.
- There were some correlations, however.
 - Using a standard scale, these correlations ranged from moderate to strong.
 - Some were close enough to moderate that I took note of them.
 - One thing to note, however, is that Pearson's Correlation Coefficient shows relationship, but not causation.
 - There is a relationship between two sets of data.
 - Positive or negative
 - Pearson's does not indicate which causes the other to move
 - Sometimes can infer this, other times not
- The strongest correlation was the tenure of the senior pastor.
 - This was true whether gauging the correlation between tenure and impact of IDD during the past 12 months, COVID, or the 2020 election.
 - *Three Charts*
- There was a weak negative correlation between the typical political leaning of one's ministry context and the impact of IDD.
 - This means the more conservative the area, the less impact IDD has.
 - This was a stronger correlation between the ministry context and impact of IDD during COVID.
 - However, the range of answers show that the typical RMCN congregation experiences IDD based on levels of conservatism rather than conservatism vs liberalism.
- The more a pastor addresses political issues from the platform, the more impact IDD has.
 - Again, I can't make a judgment on which causes which.
 - The pastor is causing it, or the pastor is trying to address it.
- However, that relationship is flipped when confined to the 2020 election season.
- Educational levels had a moderate correlation to the impact of IDD.
 - The education level of the pastor had a moderate positive correlation.
 - The more education the pastor has, the less impact IDD has.
 - That's flipped with the congregation.
 - The more education the congregation has, the more impact IDD has.
- There was no pattern when considering if a church has clear mission and vision statements.
 - However, not having them has a clear relationship to the presence of IDD
 - Does not have statements 100% past 12 months, 80% COVID, 80% 2020 election
 - Congregation does not embrace 67% past 12 months, 83% COVID, 67% 2020.

Conclusions on Initial Survey Data

- Ideologically Driven Disunity exists in a wide range of ministry contexts.
 - This was actually a significant result.
 - It's tempting to think that the survey was not helpful.
 - It shows that EDD is something that pastors and church leaders across the region deal with.
 - There was no pattern in the efficacy of attempts to address IDD.
- Ideologically Driven Disunity is worsened by events.
 - This is due to the foundational nature of ideologies, which we'll address more fully later.
 - We think that our ideology is built on our theology and spirituality, but the reverse is largely true.
 - What divides evangelicals can be found underneath our theology, on the often-recognized mental and social frame on which our theology sits.
 - *Mark Labberton*
 - It's easy to confuse ideology and spirituality.
 - *Maurice Cranston's definition of ideology*
 - They are comprehensive in that they seek to incorporate all the human experience.
 - They are goal-oriented in that they often have an objective toward which adherents of the ideology strive.
 - They require effort to maintain.
 - They require a commitment to a cause.
 - They are intellectual, driven more by reason than emotion.
 - People with more education and an ability to communicate are often given greater respect.
 - So, a church can have a superficial unity if their ideologies are not challenged.
 - When a stressor comes, what's inside truly shows.
 - COVID
 - A contentious election
- IDD is weaker when relationships are stronger.
 - The pastor's tenure
 - He understands the church culture.
 - He can navigate the "squeeze."
 - Ministry teams
 - Those who are most committed to the Great Commission

How Do We Address Ideologically Driven Disunity?

- It's obvious that pastors and church leaders need to
 - It's prevalent
 - It's worsened by events
 - It's present in churches with different factors.
 - Size
 - Theology
 - Ministry context
 - A lot of what we've done hasn't helped.

- I would contend that much of what we've done has made it worse.
 - We haven't recognized the foundational nature of ideology.
 - Including our own
 - ***Just like your accent...***
 - We must listen to a third voice.
 - If my ideology is foundational and your ideology is foundational, most attempts to come to an understanding will go nowhere.
 - It becomes much more of an attempt to prove who's right.
 - Especially because ideological discussions often take the form of a zero-sum game
 - One wins, the other loses
 - Exacerbated by the similarities of ideology and spirituality
 - If we can find the voice of Jesus in the noise, we can have a unity that isn't based on ideology.
 - That conflict is part and parcel of Christian unity means that the unity of a church is not based on agreements, but rather one that assumes that disagreements should not lead to division but rather should be a testimony to the existence of a reconciling people.
 - ***Stanley Hauerwas***
- We must consider our part.
 - We have a foundational ideology.
 - If we are going to ask others to set aside their ideology and listen to the voice of Jesus, we must do the same.
 - Ask yourself
 - How have I contributed to the situation?
 - Am I more concerned with my own stance than with finding unity?
 - Am I having more political or ideological conversations than spiritual conversations?
 - Am I confusing ideology and spirituality
 - Is the Great Commission's charge to make disciples of Jesus more important than making disciples of my ideology?
- We must understand the real cause of IDD.
 - It appears to have intellectual, spiritual, or personal causes.
 - Different worldviews
 - Stubbornness
 - Arrogance
 - The root cause is fear.
 - Fear of losing what they once had
 - When someone says, "The United States isn't as Christian as it once was," what do they mean?
 - They are probably thinking about political, cultural, or ideological issues rather than spirituality.
 - Fear of the "other side" winning
 - Comes back to the zero-sum game perspective
 - You win, I lose

- For many conservative evangelicals, changes in theological understandings, social patterns, and moral norms threaten the instinct to control. The perceived loss of control then spawns the impulse to fight back. It isn't surprising, therefore, that evangelicals have consistently been politically conservative and frequently frame their engagement in politics with the language of apocalypse, fear, and warfare.
 - **Mark Labberton**
 - What is the antidote to fear?
 - Love
 - Remember, IDD is weaker where relationships are stronger.
 - Pastoral care, personal conversations, and expressions of love go much further than debate.
- Play the infinite game.
 - Simon Sinek's book about two different ways that individuals or groups interact
 - Finite games have known players, fixed rules, and an agreed-upon objective.
 - Infinite games have known and unknown players, no exact rules, and the only objective is to keep playing the game.
 - Two things to note
 - Each of the characteristics of the infinite game apply to the way pastors and church leaders can address IDD.
 - Mistaking an infinite game for a finite game only leads to strife, lack of trust, and hindrance of the mission.
 - Characteristics of an infinite game
 - Advance a just cause
 - The church advances the ultimate just cause: glorifying God through making disciples.
 - Several of the pastors in the interviews and focus group pointed to focusing on the mission as the primary factor in avoiding IDD in their congregation.
 - Build Trusting Teams
 - The importance of relationships cannot be overstated.
 - Especially in your leadership group
 - One pastor said one of the best things they did was gather their elders every other week for dinner.
 - They talked about tough issues.
 - Including theological and cultural issues
 - Even though they have a diverse group
 - These preemptory conversations set the stage for their church to handle disunity in the congregation because the leadership knew they had each other's backs and they had practiced having hard conversations.
 - Study your worthy rivals

- Sinek focuses on business, so I've adapted some of this characteristic.
 - As you're having an ideological discussion that has the potential to tip into a source of disunity, try to find something about the other person's stance that you can admire, even if you disagree with it.
 - There is always something.
 - Pro-choice—I admire your desire to help women
 - Immigration issues—I love the way you want to show care and compassion
 - You should preach on politics more—I appreciate your desire to effect change
 - Then try to steer the conversation back to the just cause of fulfilling the Great Commission
 - Prepare for existential flexibility
 - Wrestle with your own foundational ideology.
 - Is there something you need to change or soften?
 - Is there something you need to let go of?
 - One pastor said he's learning what battles to fight.
 - While every battle may be worth fighting, not every battle is worth fighting *right now*.
 - Demonstrate the courage to lead.
 - The previous four characteristics come together to help a pastor or church leader lead with courage.
 - Advancing a just cause clarifies what we're to do.
 - Trusting teams give support.
 - Studying your worthy adversary gives you a tool to diffuse a difficult conversation.
 - Existential flexibility helps a church leader understand that they Do not need to win every debate.
- An Illustration
 - Pronouns...
 - Advance a just cause
 - Any time we make an ideology-adjacent decision, we must be able to tie it to the Great Commission.
 - Otherwise, it's just an ideological stance.
 - We want to reach transgender youth by showing we care.
 - We want to help students grow in their understanding of truth.
 - Build trusting teams
 - Your leadership group must wrestle with this well before it's ever a public conversation.
 - Must have a unified front
 - Existential flexibility
 - Are you showing care or caving to culture?
 - Are you standing for truth or promoting your ideology?
 - Study worthy rivals
 - What are people with different views saying?

- How are they fulfilling the Great Commission better?
 - Lead with courage
 - There will be bumps.
 - Do not prevaricate.
- Know when to move on.
 - One pastor asked, “how do you know when it’s time to “pray someone off? How do you do that?”
 - There are no simple answers.
 - There are some principles.
 - When?
 - You have a finite amount of energy.
 - Spiritual, physical, emotional
 - What you spend on one thing cannot be spent on another.
 - The same is true for your leadership group
 - How will you spend it?
 - What will put your congregation in the best spot for fulfilling the Great Commission?
 - Achieving unity with a congregant
 - Focusing on making disciples
 - How?
 - Look for areas of agreement and admiration.
 - Reinforce the mission of the church.
 - And invite them to join you.
 - If they want to leave
 - Bless them
 - Do not chase them

Ask Yourself Tough Questions

What do I hope to achieve?

What is most important in this discussion?

Who has my back?

How can I develop a trusting team?

What am I overlooking in someone who disagrees with me?

What am I willing to give up?

If I win, what do I lose?

You have tools

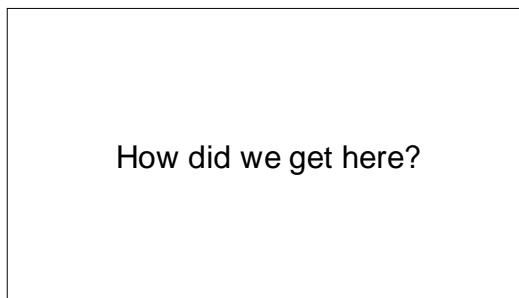
- We are here for you
 - I am
 - Our Board is
 - Our Regional Care Pastors are
- Project Tools
 - Devotional
 - Sermons
 - Unity Covenant

Appendix J

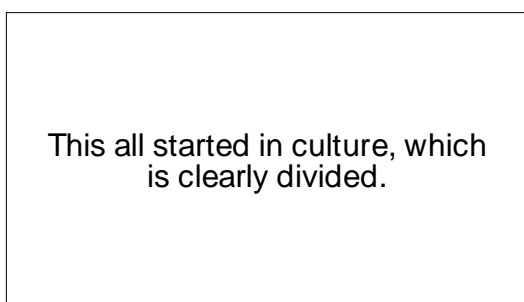
One-Day Presentation Keynote Slides



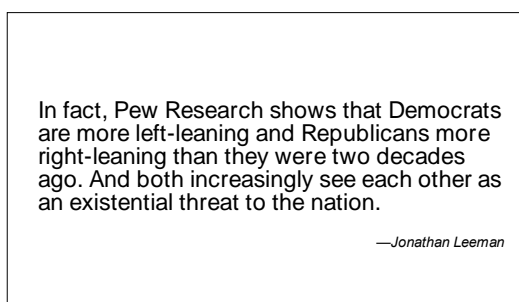
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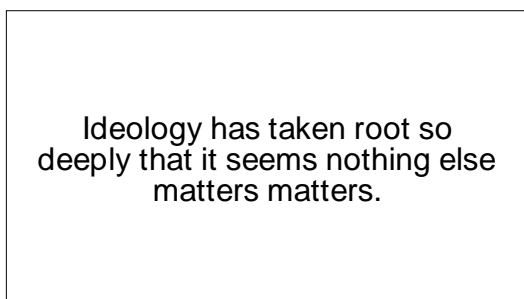
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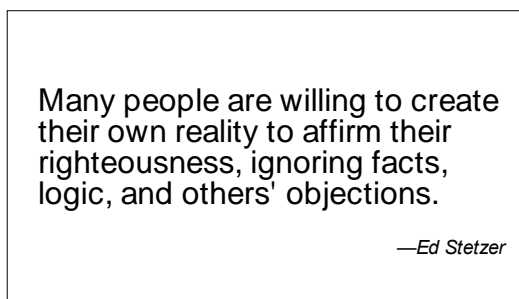
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It should be different in the church.

7

What matters, therefore, is the reality of the interdependence that gives visibility to our catholicity. The form--that is, the institutional arrangement--that expresses our interdependence is valuable but secondary. What is crucial is the effectiveness of how the gospel is lived out so that the gift and grace of God are apparent by the very fact that such a people exist.

—Stanley Hauerwas

8

That difference empowers the church to do what God calls it to do.

9

From the very beginning, divisions have threatened the mission of the church. But it is also evident that from the very beginning, followers of Christ have demonstrated that they can overcome divisions in order to preserve and strengthen the mission.

—Christena Cleveland

10

Unfortunately, the church is often not different from culture.

11

By simply categorizing, we often create subcategories that detract from the more important, all-inclusive category of the body of Christ. Before we know it, whether people are pro-life or pro-choice, Calvinist or Arminian, or black or white is more important than whether they are part of the family of God.

—Ed Stetzer

12

This hinders our mission.

13

And the outcome, I suggest, is at best an anemic capacity to respond to the gospel for the sake of the world.

—Walter Brueggemann

14

COVID revealed and accelerated what was already happening.

15

Ground Rules

16

Difference can threaten unity, but unity cannot be catholic without difference.

—Stanley Hauerwas

17

When's the best time to plant a tree? Twenty years ago...

**When's the second best time?
Today.**

18

Biblical Foundations

19

Matthew 16:13-18

20

**Jesus gives an incredible
promise.**

21

**He will build his church as it
focuses on him.**

22

**Jesus gets very possessive of
the church.**

23

Matthew 28:18-20

24

Make. Disciples.

25

**Baptizing them
Teaching them
To Observe**

26

**Making disciples has to include
all three.**

27

John 17

28

**Jesus prays for the unity of the
church throughout the ages.**

29

**What did we find out about our
churches?**

30

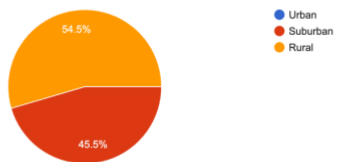
22 churches are represented.
46% of RMCN congregations

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Data Concerning Congregations

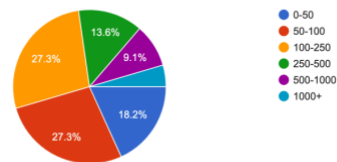
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What best describes your ministry context?
22 responses



33

What is the approximate size of your weekend service(s)?
22 responses



34

Congregational Age

35

Kingdom Impact

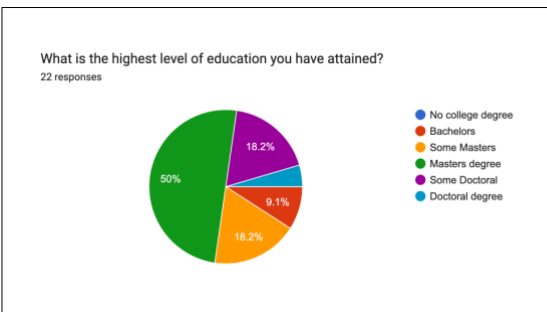
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Data Concerning Pastors

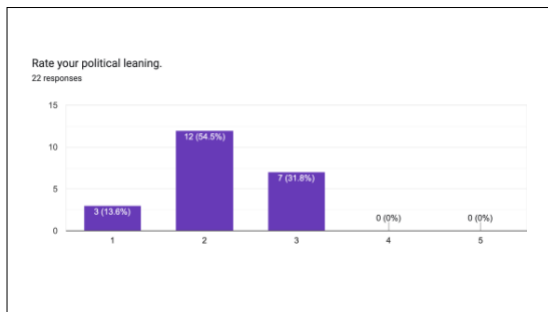
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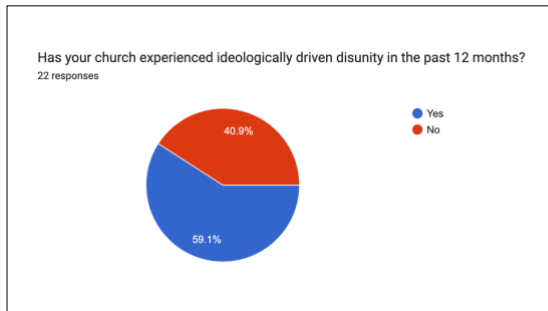
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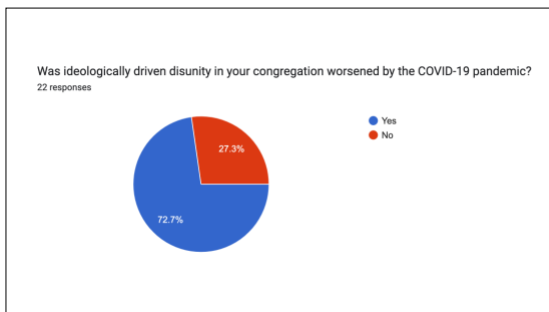
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Data Concerning Presence and Impact of IDD

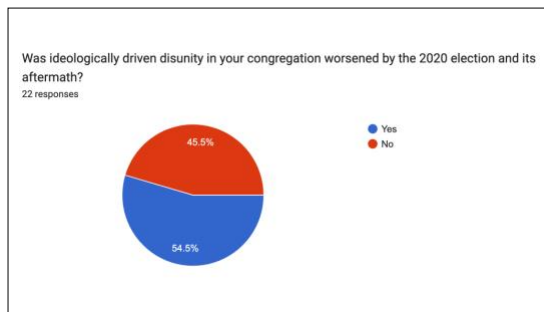
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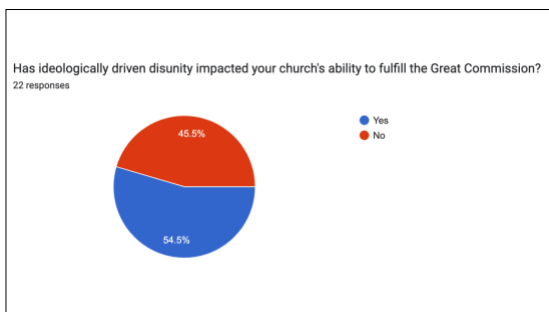
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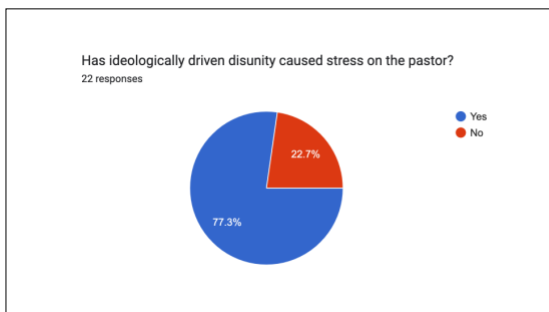
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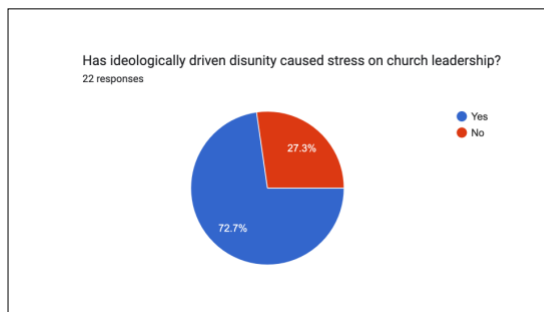
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Data Concerning the Impact of
IDD on Pastors and Church
Leadership

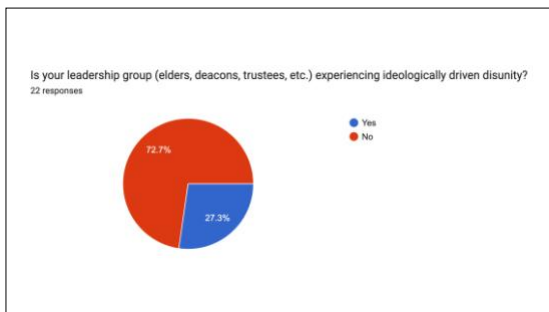
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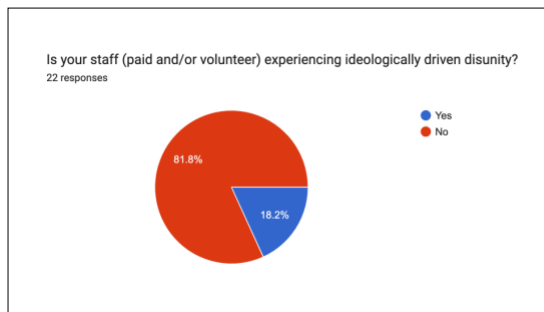
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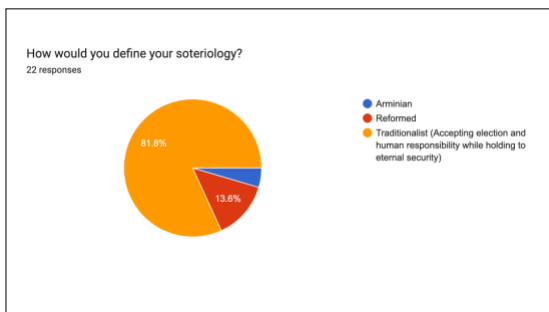
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Correlations in Data from Initial Survey

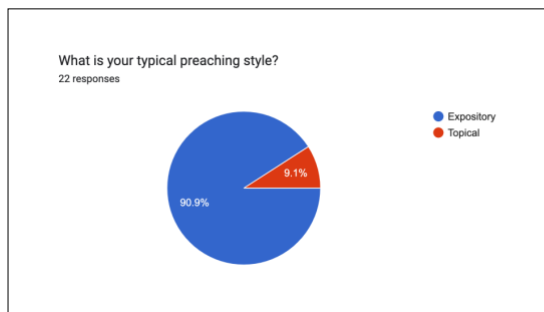
51

There was a surprising lack of correlations in the data.

52



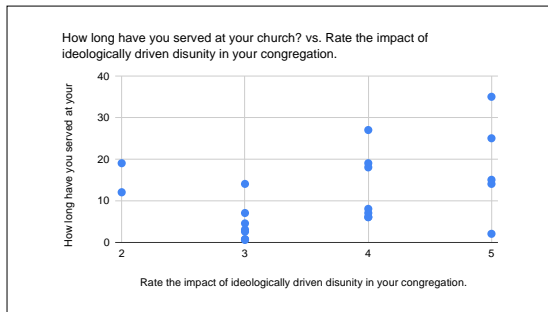
53



54

There were a few significant correlations.

55



56

There is a weak-to-moderate correlation between the typical political leaning of the ministry context and the impact of IDD.

57

The more a pastor addresses political issues from the platform, the more impact IDD has.

58

Educational levels had a moderate correlation to the impact of IDD.

59

There was no positive pattern concerning mission and vision statements and the presence of IDD.

60

There was a clear negative pattern concerning mission and vision statements and the presence of IDD.

61

Conclusions from Initial Survey Data

62

IDD exists in a wide range of ministry contexts.

63

IDD is worsened by events.

64

What divides evangelicals can be found underneath our theology, on the often-unrecognized mental and social frame on which our theology sits.

—Mark Labberton

65

**They are comprehensive.
They are goal-oriented.
They require effort to maintain.
They require commitment to a cause.
They are intellectual.**

66

**IDD is weaker when relationships
are stronger.**

67

How do we address IDD?

68

We have to listen to a third voice.

69

That conflict is part and parcel of Christian unity means that the unity of a church is not based on agreements, but rather one that assumes that disagreements should not lead to division but rather should be a testimony to the existence of a reconciling people.

—Stanley Hauerwas

70

We have to consider our part.

71

**We have to understand the real
cause of IDD.**

72

For many conservative evangelicals, changes in theological understandings, social patterns, and moral norms threaten the instinct to control. The perceived loss of control then spawns the impulse to fight back. It isn't surprising, therefore, that evangelicals have consistently been politically conservative and frequently frame their engagement in politics with the language of apocalypse, fear, and warfare.

—Mark Labberton

73

Play the infinite game.

74

**Known players, fixed rules, an
agreed-upon objective**

**Known and unknown players, no
exact rules, infinite objective**

75

**Advance a just cause
Build trusting teams
Study your worthy rivals
Prepare for existential flexibility
Demonstrate the courage to lead**

76

Know when to move on.

77

**What do I hope to achieve?
What is most important in this
discussion?
Who has my back?
How can I develop a trusting
team?**

78

What am I overlooking in
someone who disagrees with
me?
What am I willing to give up?
If I win, what do I lose?

79

Resources

80

www.rmcn.org/e-pluribus-una-ecclesia



81

Appendix K

One-Day Presentation Handout



E PLURIBUS UNA ECCLESIA

FINDING UNITY IN THE
MISSION OF THE CHURCH

PROJECT NOTEBOOK
TAYLORSVILLE, UT
BROOMFIELD, CO
SHERIDAN, WY

JOHN CRAFT
Regional Executive Director
Rocky Mountain Church Network

DON'T LET IDEOLOGY DIVIDE

Purpose of the Survey

The Initial Survey serves two purposes. First, the Initial Survey helps identify and define the ministry context of this action research project. This includes the nature of congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network, which provides a foundation for understanding the data concerning Ideologically Driven Disunity (IDD). Second, the Initial Survey provides data that reveals possible correlation between various factors and the presence and impact of IDD.

Initial Survey Data Concerning RMCN Congregations

The Rocky Mountain Church Network consists of 46 churches located in 4 states in the Rocky Mountain region, along with one church in Kansas and one church in Nebraska. The researcher recruited pastors and church leaders throughout RMCN via email, phone calls, and personal conversations. Twenty-two pastors and church leaders consented to participate in the action research project. The project participation represents 46% of RMCN congregations. These congregations either have a strong history of connection with the regional association or are experiencing a growing relationship with RMCN. While the researcher had desired to have 50% participation, the churches represented in the project are a sufficient representation of the congregations in RMCN.

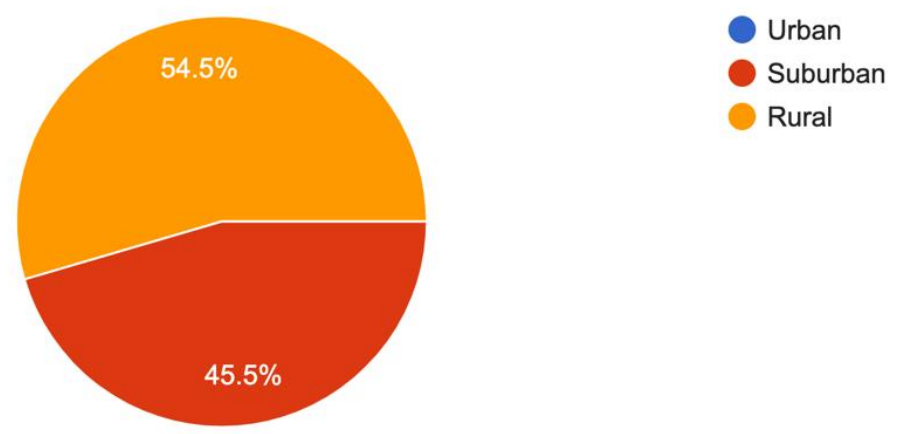
Ministry Context

The congregations represented in the Initial Survey are nearly evenly divided between suburban and rural settings, with 54.5% indicating a rural location and 45.5% indicating suburban. As there are only three metropolitan regions (Denver, Colorado Springs, and Salt Lake City) within the purview of RMCN, this result is an accurate reflection of the ministry context.

Churches from each of the three metropolitan regions and the four Rocky Mountain states (Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Utah) were represented in this data.

What best describes your ministry context?

22 responses



While no churches identified their ministry context as Urban, RMCN serves several churches within Denver. However, there was no participation in this action research project among those congregations due to several factors. Some currently have no senior pastor and the researcher had difficulty obtaining contact info for a different church leader. Others had out-of-date contact information. Others gave no response to the researcher’s invitation to participate in this project.

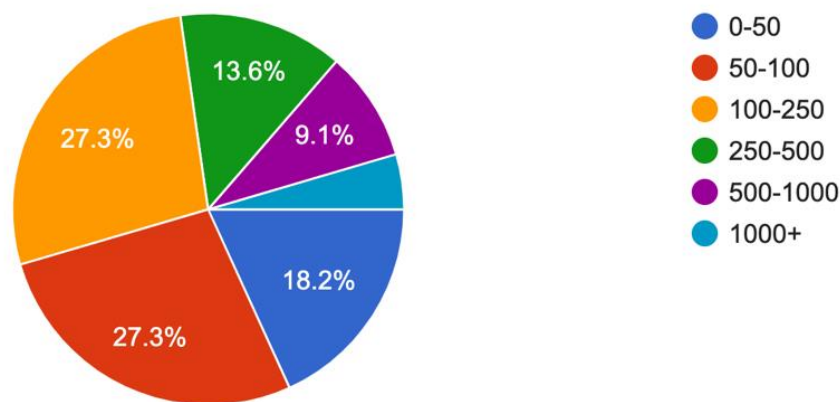
Congregational Size

Project participants report a wide array of worship service attendance, which reflects the varied nature of RMCN churches. This provides insight into the presence and impact of IDD within congregations with different dynamics. The size of congregations in RMCN varies greatly, with churches from 0–50 in weekly attendance to over 1000 gathering each week. There

are churches with solo pastors and churches with multiple levels of professional staff accountability. There are churches with one service and churches with multiple services. These various factors are present in both the suburban and rural churches represented in this project. The varied nature of this data allows the researcher to identify trends and correlations that are not dependent upon a singular aspect of the ministry context.

What is the approximate size of your weekend service(s)?

22 responses



Age of Congregations

The churches represented in the project have existed for an average of 88 years, with a median age of 87.5 years. Of the 22 congregations represented, 11 of them are over 100 years old, with two over 150. This data partly reflects the lack of church planting in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

Effectiveness in Great Commission Fulfillment

Two methods of measuring a congregation's effectiveness in fulfilling the Great Commission are the number of professions of faith witnessed through the direct ministry of the church²⁵² and baptisms. Project participants reported an average of 12.9 professions of faith in the past 12 months. However, this average is skewed by the presence of one church that witnessed 124 professions of faith. A more accurate reflection of Great Commission effectiveness seen through RMCN churches over the past 12 months may be the median number of professions of faith, which is 3.5. The average number of baptisms in the past year in project participants' congregations is 11.1, with the median number of baptisms being 5.5.

To determine any correlation between Great Commission effectiveness and the impact of IDD, the researcher utilized an additional metric based on professions of faith and baptisms per congregant. One obstacle to this was the fact that participants chose between various ranges of congregational size rather than reporting a specific worship attendance. To account for various sizes of churches, the researcher used the midpoint of the congregational size. For example, churches that reported a weekend gathering attendance of 0 to 50 were considered congregations of 25 and churches that reported a weekend gathering attendance of 500 to 1000 were considered to have an attendance of 750. Churches over 1000 in attendance were assigned the weekend gathering attendance of 1500. Utilizing this metric, congregations represented in the project reported seeing between 0 to 0.13 professions of faith per attender and 0 to 0.12 baptisms per attender. Any potential correlation between this metric and the impact of IDD will be discussed in a later section.

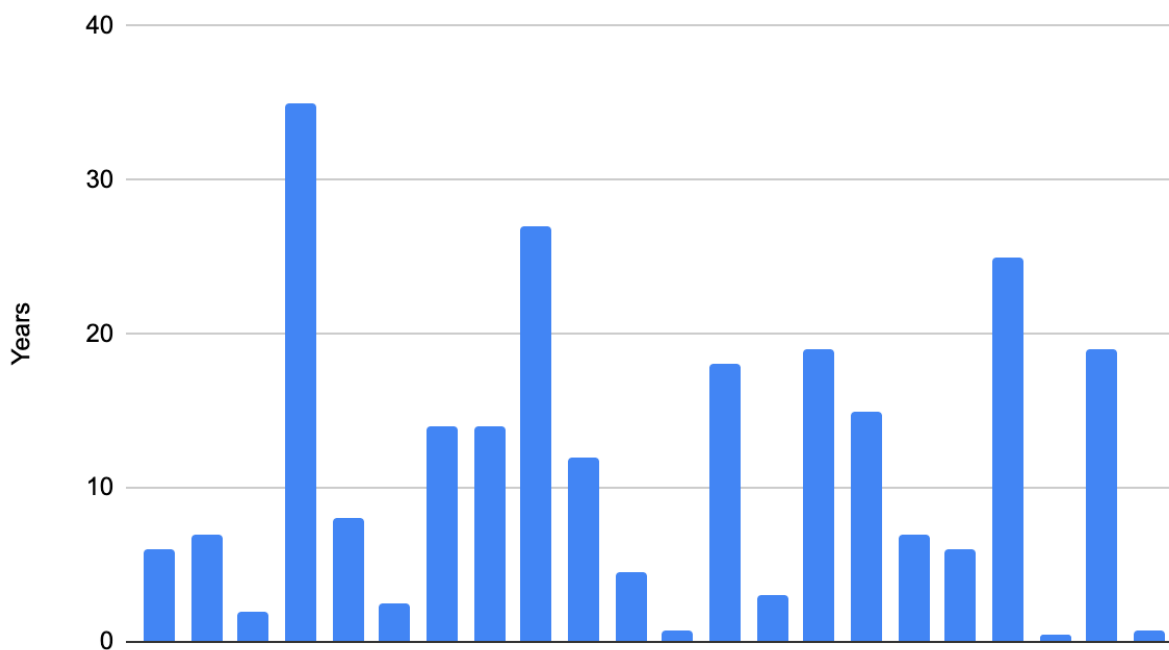
²⁵² The Initial Survey specifically gauged professions of faith through the direct ministry of the church. This is differentiated from professions of faith that are witnessed through external ministries the church supports, including missionaries, parachurch organizations, or other Christian ministries. While important, supporting such ministries may not reflect a culture of Great Commission fulfillment in a local congregation.

Initial Survey Data Regarding RMCN Pastors

Project participants were limited to senior pastors or, in the case of a pastoral vacancy, a primary church leader such as a Chairman of an Elder Board or Church Council. This action research project was completed by 19 senior pastors and three church leaders. Each responded to survey questions regarding their tenure, education, and political leanings.

The church leaders in the survey have served their current congregations for an average of 11.2 years, with the shortest tenure being 6 months and the longest 35. The median tenure is 7.5 years.

How long have you served at your church?



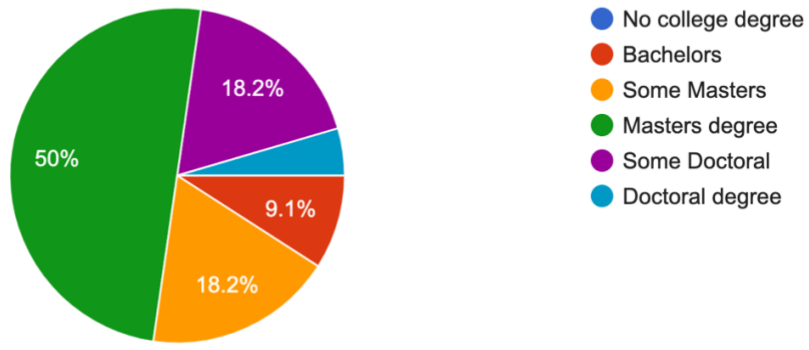
The project participants reported their highest level of education. Fifty percent of respondents indicated they had received a master's degree, which was the most reported level of education. Two participants have attained a bachelor's degree, while one has received a

doctorate. The remaining participants have achieved either some master’s level or doctoral level education.

Project participants also identified their personal political leanings. Each participant utilized a scale from “Very Conservative” to “Very Liberal” to gauge their own political ideology. For the purpose of discovering any correlation between political viewpoints and IDD, the researcher assigned each response a numerical value. “Very Conservative” has a value of 1, while “Very Liberal” has a value of 5.

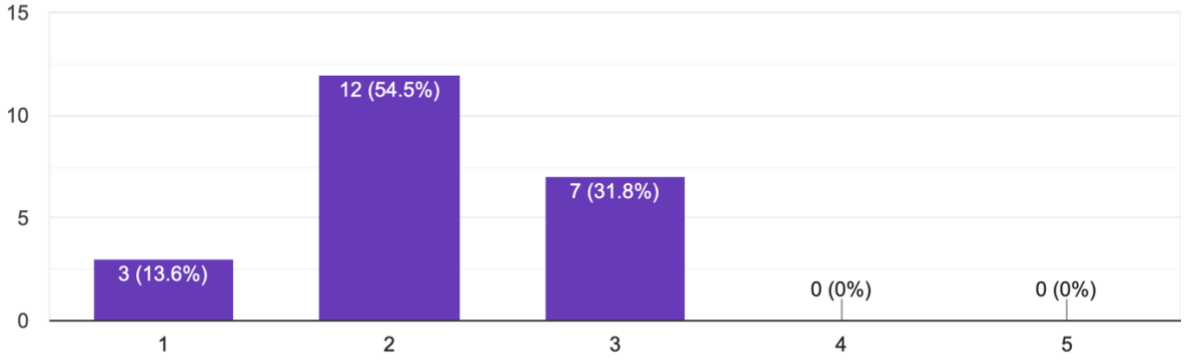
What is the highest level of education you have attained?

22 responses



Rate your political leaning.

22 responses



The project participants identified their political leanings from 1 to three, with an average of 2.2. This shows that the participants in the study identify their political leanings as Center-Right.

The Impact of Ideologically Driven Disunity

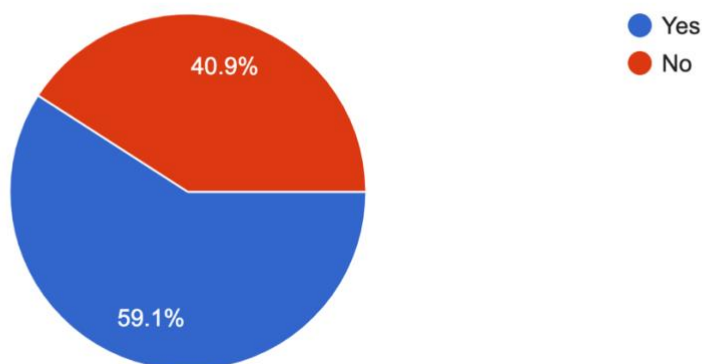
Impact on Congregations

The Initial Survey reveals the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity in three time periods: the past 12 months, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2020 election season and its aftermath. The Initial Survey also reveals the impact of IDD on pastors, church leadership, and congregations.

Project participants were asked if their congregation had experienced IDD in the past twelve months. Of the 22 participants, 59.1% indicated the presence of IDD. The presence of IDD in churches represented in this project is shown in the chart on the following page.

Has your church experienced ideologically driven disunity in the past 12 months?

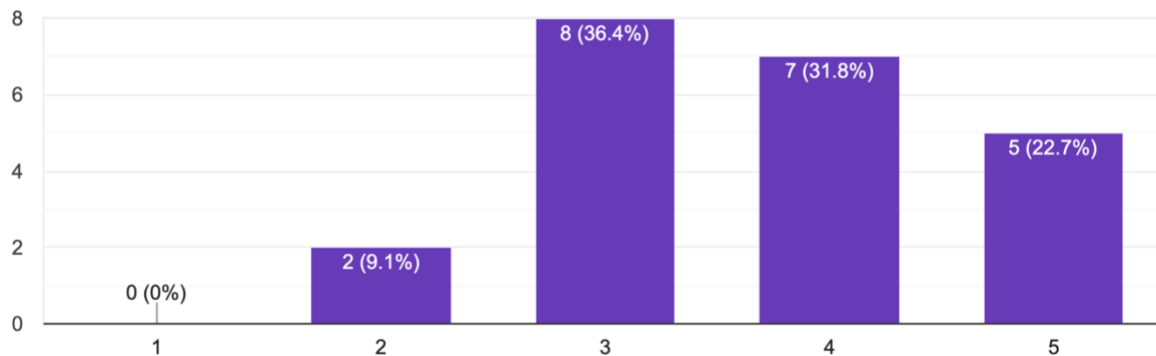
22 responses



Project participants also rated the impact of IDD on their congregation on a scale from “Severe” to “None.” This scale was assigned numerical values, with “Severe” equaling 1 and “None” equaling 5. The average impact of IDD in churches represented in this project was 3.7.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

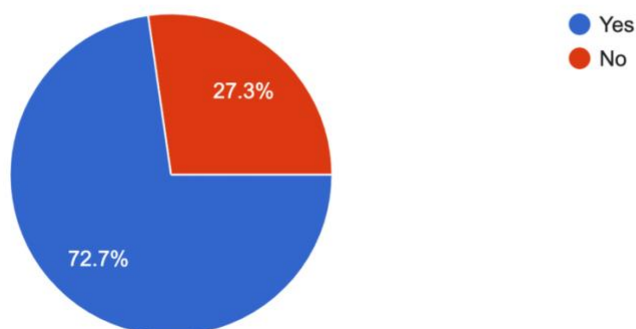
22 responses



Project participants indicated that events, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election season and its aftermath, worsened ideologically driven disunity. 72.7% of participants indicated that IDD was worsened by the pandemic. Project participants also indicated IDD had greater impact during the COVID-19 pandemic than during the past 12 months, averaging 3.4 on the same scale used to determine the impact of IDD during the past 12 months. This is an increase of reported impact of 7%.

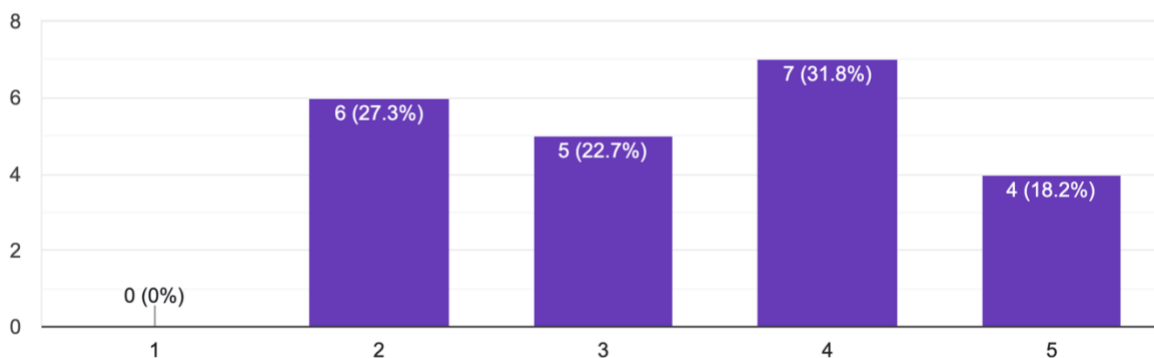
Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic?

22 responses



Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

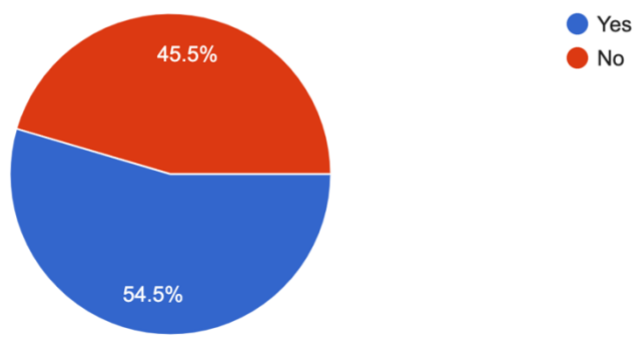
22 responses



The 2020 election and its aftermath also increased the presence of ideologically driven disunity, with 54.5% of participants indicating an increase in IDD. According to project participants, however, the impact of IDD was less than the past 12 months, unlike the COVID-19 pandemic. The average response to the impact of IDD, using the same scale as the previous two examples, was 3.82. This represents a 3.8% decrease in perceived impact versus the impact of IDD during the past 12 months.

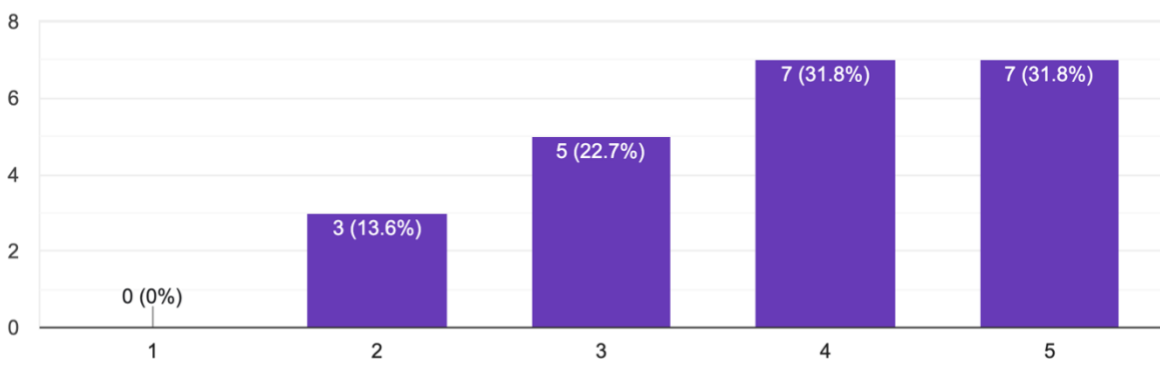
Was ideologically driven disunity in your congregation worsened by the 2020 election and its aftermath?

22 responses



Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

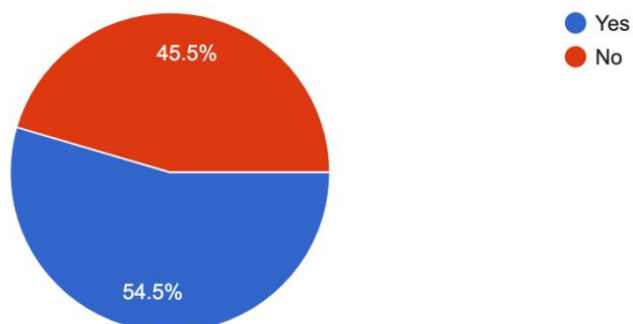
22 responses



The presence of ideologically driven disunity has had an impact on congregational life and on the ability to fulfill the Great Commission. When asked if people had left their congregation in the past 12 months due to ideological differences with church leadership or with other members of the congregation, 45.5% of participants responded, “Yes.” Participants also indicated that IDD had impacted their church’s ability to fulfill the Great Commission.

Has ideologically driven disunity impacted your church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission?

22 responses

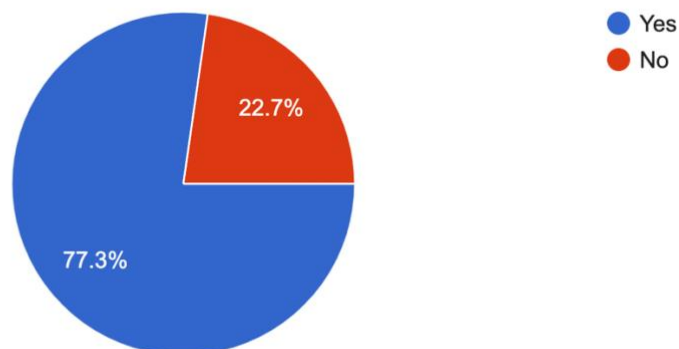


Impact on Pastors and Church Leadership

The impact of ideologically driven disunity on pastors in RMCN is evident. 77.3% of project participants reported that IDD caused stress on the senior pastor. This is 31% higher than the reported presence of ideologically driven disunity. Stress on church leadership is evident as well, with 72.7% of the project participants indicating their leadership group has felt stress due to IDD.

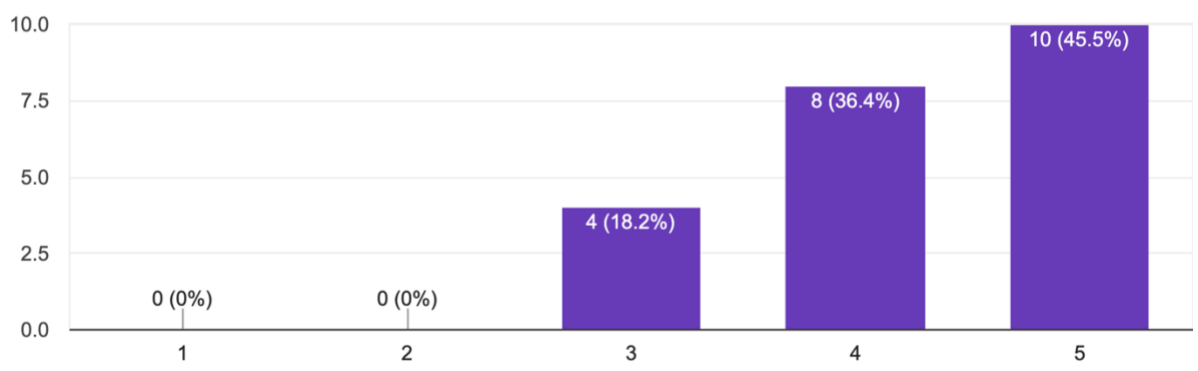
Has ideologically driven disunity caused stress on the pastor?

22 responses



While both pastors and church leadership have experienced stress due to ideologically driven disunity, church staffs and leadership groups have experienced unity. Despite 59.1% of project participants reporting disunity in their congregations, only 27.3% reported IDD in their leadership group. When asked to rate the impact of IDD on their leadership group, participants reported a low impact. Using the same scale from “Severe” (1) to “None” (5), participants rated the impact of IDD on their leadership group at an average of 4.3.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your leadership group.
22 responses

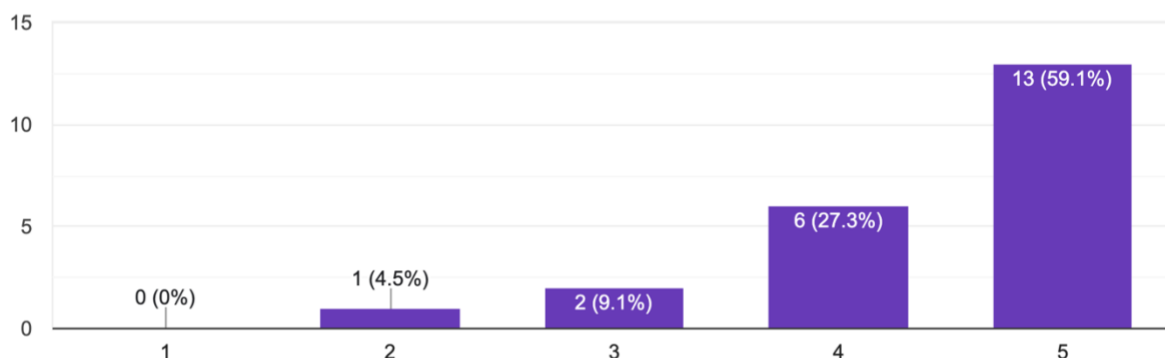


The impact of IDD on church staff²⁵³ was rated even lower, with only 18.2% of respondents indicating the presence of disunity. Further, the impact of ideologically driven disunity was rated even lower than the impact on church leadership, with an average of 4.4 on the same scale.

²⁵³ For the purposes of this study, church staff is defined as paid and/or volunteer.

Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity among your staff (paid and/or volunteer).

22 responses

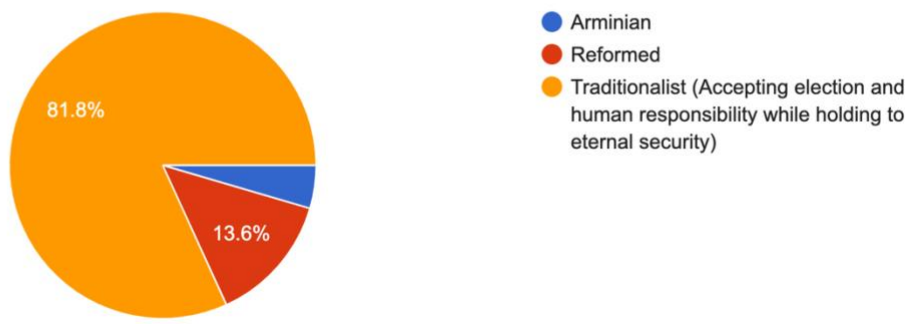


Statistical Correlations in the Initial Survey Data

The Initial Survey revealed several statistical correlations. What is more unexpected, however, was the relative lack of correlations in the data. The researcher asked about several factors that might have influenced the presence of ideologically driven disunity. Most of these factors, however, seem to have no effect on the presence of IDD. Some of this was due to the monolithic nature of the responses to some questions. For example, questions regarding the soteriological view and preaching style of the project participants engendered one response that was so overwhelmingly monolithic that the results were rendered statistically irrelevant due to being nearly the same as the entire participant pool.

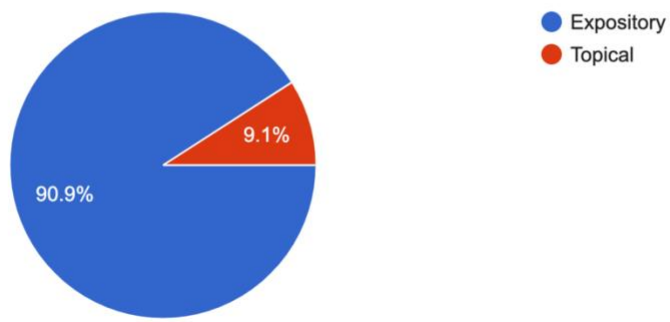
How would you define your soteriology?

22 responses



What is your typical preaching style?

22 responses



Other data revealed no correlation between specific factors and the presence of ideologically driven disunity. For example, neither the number of professions of faith in the past 12 months nor the number of baptisms in the same period bore any relevance to the presence or impact of ideologically driven disunity. This was the same result when the time parameter was the past twelve months, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the 2020 election and its aftermath. Similar results were achieved when considering the political activity of the project participant, the size of the congregation, or the socioeconomic status of the congregation.

Using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient,²⁵⁴ the researcher discovered several correlations between different variables and the presence of IDD. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient measures correlation between two sets of variables on a scale from -1 to 1. Correlation coefficients from -1 to 0 are considered negative correlations, whereas coefficients from 0 to 1 are positive correlations.²⁵⁵ Within negative and positive correlations there are widely accepted ranges determining whether the correlation is weak, moderate, or strong.²⁵⁶

| | |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>r</i> value | |
| +.70 or higher | Very strong positive relationship |
| +.40 to +.69 | Strong positive relationship |
| +.30 to +.39 | Moderate positive relationship |
| +.20 to +.29 | Weak positive relationship |
| +.01 to +.19 | No or negligible relationship |
| 0 | No relationship (zero correlation) |
| -.01 to -.19 | No or negligible relationship |
| -.20 to -.29 | Weak negative relationship |
| -.30 to -.39 | Moderate negative relationship |
| -.40 to -.69 | Strong positive relationship |
| -.70 or lower | Very strong positive relationship |

²⁵⁴ “Correlation Coefficient.”

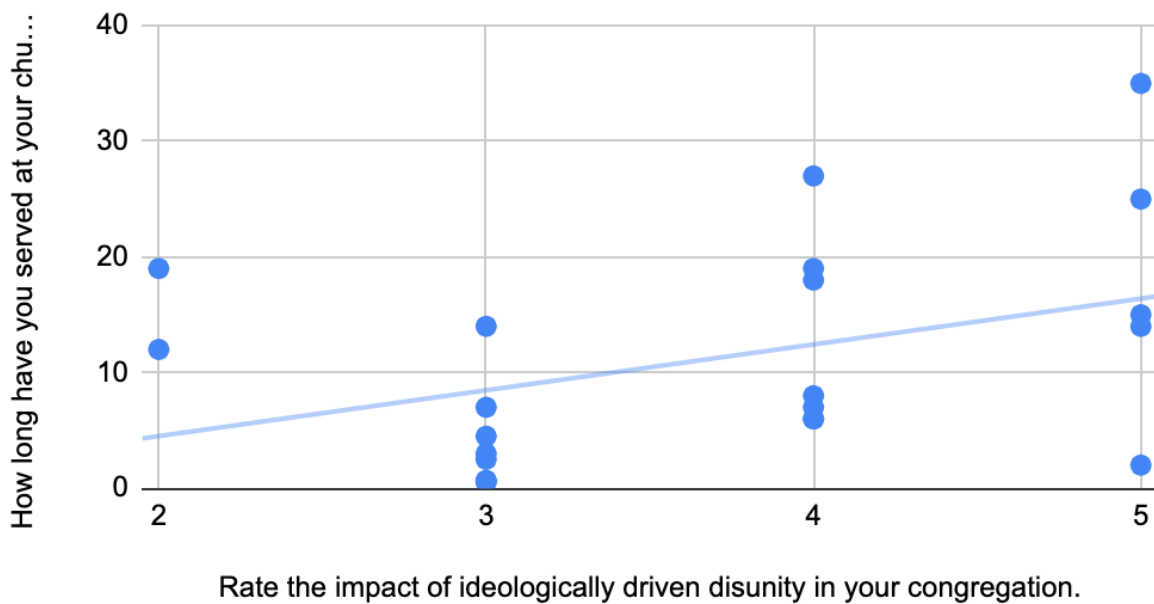
²⁵⁵ A negative correlation happens when the value of one variable goes up while the other goes down. A positive correlation happens with both variables ascending or descending concurrently.

²⁵⁶ “Correlation Coefficient.”

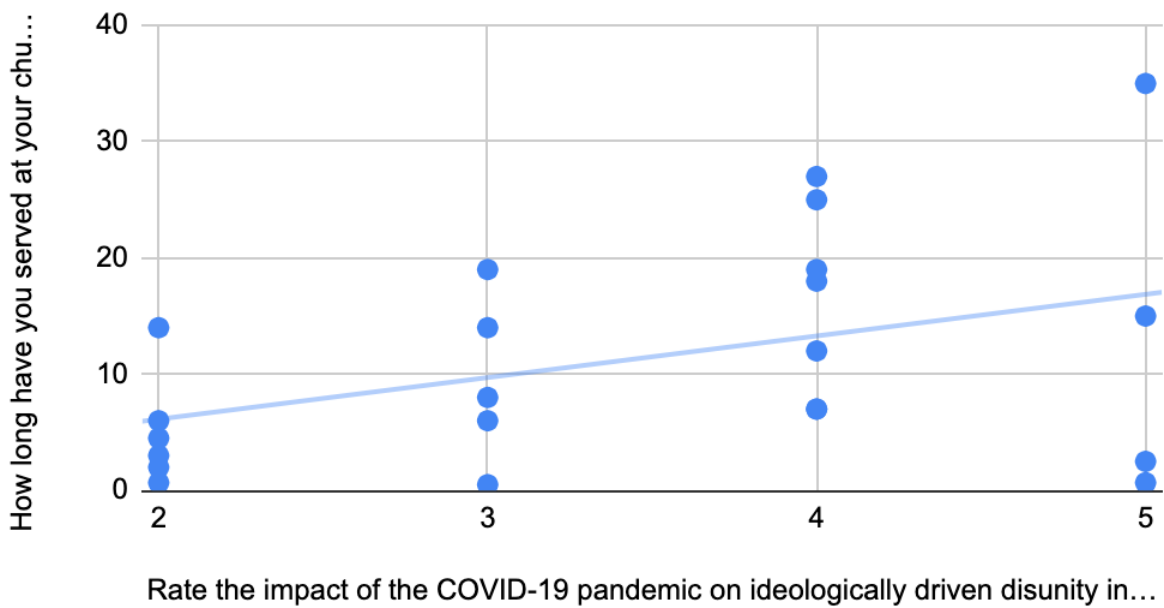
While Pearson’s Correlation Coefficients may show a statistical relationship between two sets of variables, it cannot identify which variable, if any, is causative. The only inference that one may draw from these statistical correlations is that there is a relationship between variables. For example, while there is a strong positive relationship between the length of tenure of the senior pastor and the absence of IDD, one may not conclude that the length of tenure caused the absence of disunity. It may be the case that the senior pastor has a long tenure due to the lack of stress in an environment in which there is no disunity.

Tenure of the senior pastor has the strongest correlation with the presence or absence of ideologically driven disunity. This is true whether one considers the past twelve months (PCC +.39), the COVID-19 pandemic (PCC +.41), or the 2020 election and its aftermath (PCC +.44).

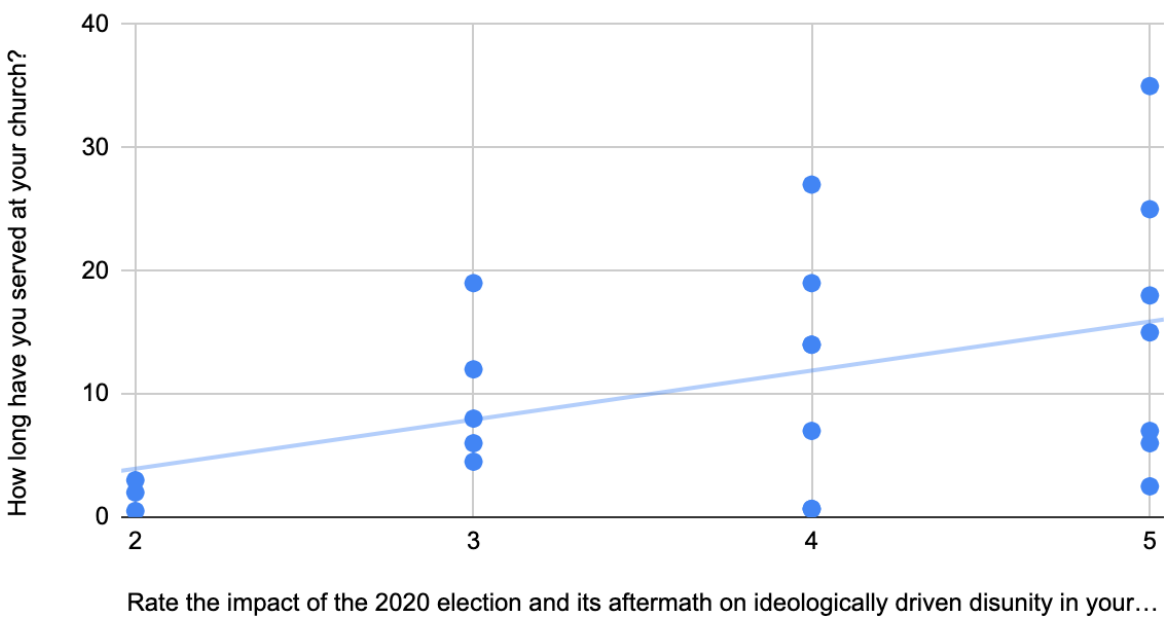
How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.



How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.



How long have you served at your church? vs. Rate the impact of the 2020 election and its aftermath on ideologically driven disunity in your congregation.

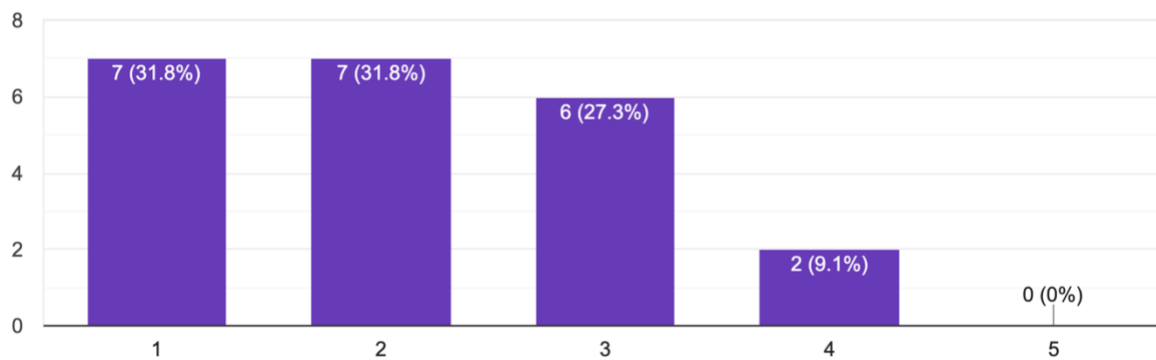


Several variables had weak-to-moderate correlation. There is a weak negative relationship (PRR -.21) between the typical political leaning of one's ministry context and the

impact of IDD in a congregation, meaning that the more conservative the ministry context, the less impact IDD has on the congregation. There is a stronger negative relationship between the typical political leaning of one’s ministry context and the impact of ideologically driven disunity during the COVID-19 pandemic (PCC $-.27$). Of note, however, is the typical political leaning of the ministry context. When asked to rate the political leaning of their ministry context, the project participants responded with an average of 2.14 on a scale of 1 being “Very Conservative” and 5 being “Very Liberal.” As both this average and the average rating of the congregation (1.86 on the same scale) are below the midpoint of 2.5, the typical congregation experiences IDD based primarily on levels of conservatism rather than on conservative versus liberal viewpoints. There is no significant relationship between the political leaning of one’s ministry context and the impact of IDD during the 2020 election and its aftermath.

What is the typical political leaning of your ministry context?

22 responses



The frequency with which the senior pastor addresses political issues from the church platform also has a moderate correlation to the impact of ideologically driven disunity. However, this correlation is widely varied when confined to specific time periods. During the past 12 months, there is a near-moderate positive relationship (PCC $+.29$), meaning that the more often

the senior pastor addresses political issues, the more impact IDD has in the congregation. However, there is a near-moderate negative relationship when the timeframe is confined to the 2020 election and its aftermath (PCC $-.29$), meaning the more often the senior pastor addressed political issues, the less impact IDD had on the congregation. Lastly, there was no statistically significant relationship between addressing political issues and the impact of IDD during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is also a moderate correlation between educational levels and the impact of ideologically driven disunity. This relationship, however, is different when one considers the educational level of the senior pastor and the typical educational level of members of the congregation. When the senior pastor has more education, the impact of IDD is less (PCC $-.29$). However, when the congregation has a higher education level, the impact of IDD is greater (PCC $+.34$).

When considering the correlation between the presence of ideologically driven disunity and the presence of clear mission and vision statements, the researcher could not use Pearson's Correlation as he was comparing two sets of "Yes" or "No" responses. Instead, the researcher compared the presence of IDD against the two possible responses to whether a church has clear mission and vision statements and whether a majority of the congregation embraces the mission and vision of the church. 53% of churches that have clear mission and vision statements experience IDD. This figure is 70% when the timeframe is constrained to the COVID-19 and 47% when constrained to the 2020 election and its aftermath. Ideologically driven disunity is exacerbated, however, by the lack of mission and vision statements and by a majority of a congregation not embracing those statements. Churches without clear mission and vision statements experienced IDD at the rate of 100% in the past twelve months, 80% during the

COVID-19 pandemic, and 80% during the 2020 election. Churches in which a majority of the congregation did not embrace the mission and vision of the church experienced IDD at a rate of 67% in the past 12 months, 83% during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 67% during the 2020 election.

Conclusions on Initial Survey Data

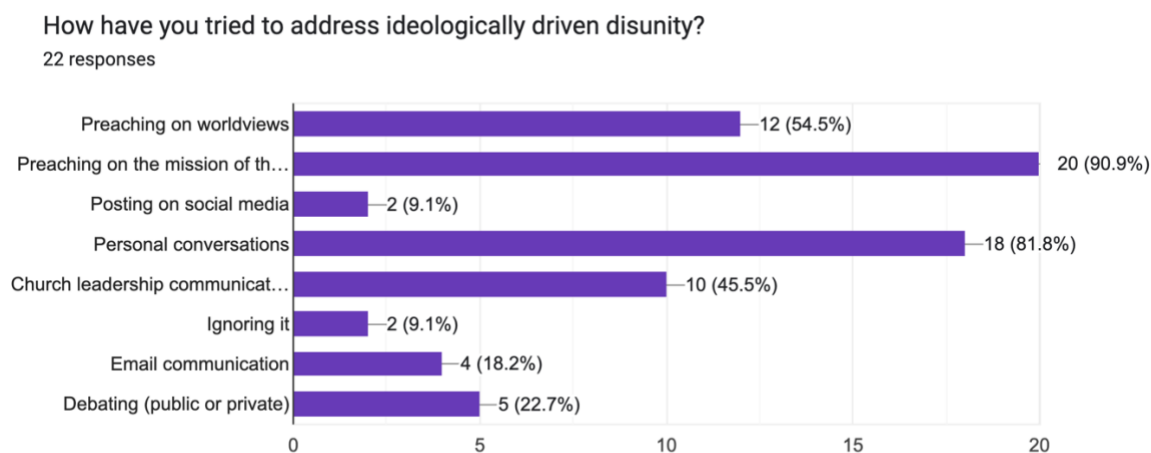
After collecting, categorizing, and analyzing the data from the Initial Survey, the researcher has come to several conclusions. The conclusions based on quantitative research, along with factors discovered in the qualitative research performed in interviews and a focus group, provide a clearer understanding of the problem facing RMCN senior pastors and church leaders. These conclusions also provide a foundation upon which methods to address IDD may be built.

IDD Exists in Multiple Environments

The researcher sought to find a correlation between multiple factors that may influence the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity. There were several factors that had no bearing on the presence or absence of IDD, in some cases surprisingly so. Prior to receiving the data from the Initial Survey, the researcher supposed that measuring the number of professions of faith and baptisms would reveal a greater commitment to the Great Commission that would make a church more likely to avoid IDD. However, this was not the case as there was no statistical correlation between the number of professions of faith/baptisms and the impact of IDD. This is just one example of the presence of IDD regardless of the presence of other factors. While it is tempting to believe that this is not a significant finding, the opposite is, in fact, true. The presence of IDD despite the presence of other factors shows that ideologically driven

disunity causes issues for a broad cross-section of congregations in the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

The fact that IDD exists in multiple environments also reveals that the efforts of church leadership to address it have been largely unsuccessful. In comparing the methods project participants have utilized to address IDD with its presence and impact, the researcher could find no pattern or correlation either alleviating or worsening disunity.



This lack of pattern or correlation leads the researcher to conclude two things. First, senior pastors and church leaders in RMCN have identified IDD as an issue and are trying to address it in multiple ways. The researcher concludes that church leadership sincerely desires to remedy the ideologically driven disunity found in their congregation. However, the methods that have been utilized have had little to no effect. Either church leaders need a different method, or their methods need adjusting.

IDD Is Worsened by Events

Comparing the presence of ideologically driven disunity during the past twelve months with its presence during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election and its aftermath shows

that IDD is not as prevalent during what may be considered a normal season—the pandemic has largely lost its influence in culture as it has abated, and the United States is between election cycles. However, the presence of ideologically driven disunity increased dramatically during the pandemic and, to a lesser extent, during the 2020 election cycle. The researcher concludes this is due, in part, to the foundational nature of ideologies. While many assume that their ideology rests upon their theology, the opposite is often true. Mark Labberton writes,

Evangelicals can affirm that faith commitments and their implications are essential to discerning values; but when evangelicals who affirm the same baseline of faith reach radically opposing social and political opinions, we have to ask what else is at play. The collision can't be explained by different definitions of the incarnation or by alternate views of the Bible and its authority. Rather, opposing views expose that underneath “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” lie basic instincts in our mental and social frames related to who and what actually matters.²⁵⁷

The reversal of the assumed priorities between ideology and theology can be attributed to the similarities between the two. The English political theorist Maurice Cranston described the characteristics of ideologies.²⁵⁸ They are comprehensive in that they seek to incorporate all the human experience. They are goal-oriented in that they often have an objective toward which adherents of the ideology strive. They require effort to maintain. They require a commitment to a cause. Finally, they are intellectual, driven more by reason than emotion. Collin Slowey writes, “The first four of Cranston’s characteristics of ideology, when disconnected from the word itself, describe just as accurately the function of religious beliefs as they do that of political ones.”²⁵⁹ When believers mistake foundational ideology for foundational theology, a congregation will

²⁵⁷ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 6.

²⁵⁸ Slowey, “The Christian and Ideology.”

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

have, at best, an ideological unity rather than one built upon the foundation of theology and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Because ideology is foundational, it takes on greater prominence when the pressure of an external event is exerted on a congregation. Wayne Dyer explains this in recounting a conversation in which he points out that when one squeezes an orange, orange juice is the result because “that’s what’s inside.” Dyer concludes, “Let’s assume that this orange isn’t an orange, but it’s you. And someone squeezes you, puts pressure on you, says something you Do not like, offends you. And out of you comes anger, hatred, bitterness, fear. Why? The answer, as our young friend has told us, is because that’s what’s inside.”²⁶⁰ Unless church leaders in the RMCN understand the foundational nature of ideologies and their rise to prominence during events that bring pressure upon their congregation, the cycle of increasing IDD during such events will continue.

IDD Is Weaker When Relationships Are Stronger

Two findings of the Initial Survey reveal the importance of relationships in addressing ideologically driven disunity. There is a clear positive correlation between the length of the senior pastor’s tenure and the lessened impact of IDD—the longer the pastor has served the congregation, the less disunity the congregation experiences. As a pastor’s tenure lengthens, three things occur. First, he gains a greater understanding of the culture of the congregation, enabling him to more effectively navigate the times that “squeeze” the congregation. Second, he becomes more engrained within the culture, rather than being viewed as new to it. This allows a church leader to play a greater role in shaping the culture of the church into one which values

²⁶⁰ “Why the Inside Matters.”

unity based in fulfilling the Great Commission. Third, trust between the pastor and the congregation grows in the context of longer relationships. This trust allows the pastor or church leader to lead with more courage during difficult seasons of ministry.

In addition to seeing the importance of relationships in the tenure of the senior pastor, one can also conclude that ministry relationships foster unity. The data concerning the presence of IDD among church leadership and church staff reveals this. These two groups are most often committed to one another and to fulfilling the mission and vision of the church; therefore, they experience less IDD. As believers strive together to fulfill the Great Commission, ideological differences can take on less importance as they work toward a greater goal.

Addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity—A Strategy

The Process Begins

We are tempted to begin the process of addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity (IDD) outside of ourselves. Believing that we are correct, we suppose that unity can be found through proving others wrong. The people with whom we disagree simply need to realize the error of their thinking, replace that with better thinking, and see the world from our perspective. If this takes place, we can move forward together in fulfilling the mission of the church. Having established this as the most logical process—at least in our own minds—we begin to have conversations with people who hold different viewpoints than we do. Sometimes these conversations take place in person, with two believers sitting down over a cup of coffee. Sometimes these conversations happen online privately through an extensive email thread. Sometimes they occur online publicly, exchanging increasingly agitated thoughts in a Facebook post or comment thread. As church leaders, sometimes we use our public platform to address

what we see as a faulty worldview. While we might tell ourselves that we are simply communicating the truth, we often have one or two people in mind as we're preaching, hoping they will hear what we're saying, listen to the truth of our message, and change their ways so that we can have unity.

The problem is...none of this is helping. There are several flaws in these approaches. First, they fail to recognize the foundational nature of ideologies. Every person in the world has an ideology—the way they make sense of the world and interact with others. Second, they assume that IDD is caused by intellectual differences. On the surface, this seems true. However, IDD is caused not by intellectual differences, but by fear of loss. Third, they lead us to try to address ideologically driven disunity through means that exacerbate it rather than reduce it. This creates a cycle of dysfunction in which we try to address IDD, make it worse, then try even harder and more forcefully. Most importantly, trying to address disunity through focusing on convincing someone else of our rightness ignores our own foundational ideologies and their role in creating disunity. As we discover a strategy for addressing IDD, the process that naturally seems correct will be reversed. We will begin with the mission of the church, move toward understanding our own role in addressing IDD, and then consider how to have missional, biblical relationships with believers who see the world differently than we do.

Finding the Third Voice

Ideologies are pervasive. Every person who has ever lived has held some form of ideology. This ideology is shaped by family background, experience, education, cultural influences, and a host of other factors. Irwyn Ince writes,

The products of a culture form from the values that lay beneath the surface of the water. There we find values, beliefs, social expectations, parenting styles, gender roles, ideas of

modesty, concepts of time, importance of space, the nature of friendship, concepts of beauty, and other unspoken aspects of culture that shape our understanding of who we are.”²⁶¹

Just as you are unaware of your own regional accent, assuming that yours is the normal way to speak while everyone else sounds different, you are probably unaware of the impact of your ideology. Assuming that yours is the correct way to view the world, you believe that others have a peculiar way of understanding how the world works. Since you do not necessarily recognize your ideology, you may not be aware of its influence on the way you view Scripture and spirituality. Mark Labberton writes, “What divides evangelicals can be found underneath our theology, on the often unrecognized mental and social frame on which our theology sits.”²⁶²

When two individuals who have differing ideologies interact, tension often results. Unaware that each has a foundational way they view the world, these two individuals will often assume the best of their own motives and understand and assume the worst of the other. This has led to a disunity that feels, at times, based in the understanding of Scripture but is a disunity based in ideology. Walter Brueggemann writes,

Paul asks the question, ‘Is Christ divided?’ He intended the answer, ‘No, Christ is not divided.’ But our lived experience tells us otherwise. Christ is indeed divided; we have each taken the part of Christ that we prefer and treasure. But here I do not speak of the big divisions among traditions and denominations. Rather, I speak of the deeply felt divisions at the local level in which the church, propelled by anxiety, divides into red and blue, liberal, and conservative, camps that mostly exhibit little openness for unity with those across the divide.²⁶³

As mentioned previously, ideology and spirituality appear very similar on the surface. Christena Cleveland notes that the “definition of religion is basically a definition of ideology that focuses

²⁶¹ Ince, *The Beautiful Community*, 131.

²⁶² Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 5.

²⁶³ Brueggemann and Stulman, *Truth and Hope*, 140.

on the sacred.” This adds an air of moral superiority to one’s ideology over against someone else’s. This results in two individuals, each finding fault in the other’s viewpoint. This disunity is then aggravated by mistaking ideology for spirituality, turning an ideological difference into a moral or spiritual dispute. This only serves to further entrench the two individuals into positions that disregard the other as unthinking and unspiritual. When this happens between groups of individuals in the church, the result is ideologically driven disunity that negatively impacts a congregation. Brueggemann writes, “And the outcome, I suggest, is at best an anemic capacity to respond to the gospel for the sake of the world.”²⁶⁴

With the church seemingly more and more divided along ideological lines, how do pastors and church leaders help their congregations find unity? Since the foundational nature of ideologies often prevents us from hearing each other, the only way to find true unity is through listening to a third, transcendent voice. For believers—members of the universal church—that voice is the voice of Jesus. As the Founder of the church,²⁶⁵ he gives the only foundational ideology that matters: the Great Commission command to “make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19, ESV).” As pastors and church leaders, we must view every ideological discussion through this lens. By listening to the third, transcendent voice of Jesus, we can move beyond ideological differences to become a unified community of mission without having to come to an ideological agreement. Stanley Hauerwas notes, “That conflict is part and parcel of Christian unity means that the unity of a church is not based on agreements, but rather one that assumes that disagreements should not lead to division but rather should be a testimony to the existence of a reconciling people.”²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Brueggemann and Stulman, 16.

²⁶⁵ Cf. Matt. 16:18.

²⁶⁶ Hauerwas, *Approaching the End*, 109.

What Have We Done?

Energy follows attention. This simple axiom is at the heart of many disciplines. The things to which we pay attention receive our effort in business, relationships, and physical exercise. If you pay attention more to your desire for rest and relaxation than to your desire for fitness, you won't get off your couch and head to the gym. If you pay more attention to your love for BBQ than to your need to "lose a few pounds," you'll find those pounds do not go anywhere. This axiom can be applied to congregations experiencing ideologically driven disunity. The journey toward addressing IDD starts with the desire of the pastor or church leader to address it. There are several other options that compete with this desire. A pastor may not want to relinquish a life-long stance. A church leader may rather avoid a difficult conversation due to his or her family history. If a pastor or church leader does not focus attention on the issue of IDD, energy will not flow into addressing it.

A church leader or pastor focuses attention on addressing IDD by recognizing the presence of his own foundational ideologies. Left unchecked, these foundational ideologies can create unnecessary division among their congregation as they interact with others who have differing ideologies. Unwittingly, pastors and church leaders can increase the level of disunity in their congregations, causing the stressful situations they want to avoid. When encountering IDD, whether with another believer or within a congregation, pastors and church leaders should begin by answering some questions:

- How have I contributed to the situation?
- Am I more concerned with my own stance than with finding unity?
- Am I having more political or ideological conversations than spiritual conversations?
- Am I confusing ideology and spirituality?
- Is the Great Commission's charge to make disciples of Jesus more important to me than leading people to see the world the way I do?

Without recognizing the presence of their own foundational ideologies, pastors and church leaders will continue to foster environments in which IDD can thrive. Allen Hilton writes, “Christian leaders and churches identify with blue or red, imagining that righteous political convictions license us to nurse open disdain for half the nation.”²⁶⁷ By identifying their own foundational ideologies, pastors and church leaders take the first step of focusing their attention on addressing IDD. As they focus attention on this, energy will follow.

Out of Many, One Church

While one can identify the cause of ideologically driven disunity and desire to address it, the presence and impact of IDD may seem overwhelming. Facing the pressure day after day, pastors and church leaders struggle to have meaningful conversations that bring God’s people together in fulfilling the Great Commission. Developing a strategy for addressing IDD is crucial. Without a strategy for addressing IDD, pastors and church leaders will continue to experience stress and congregations will be hindered in their attempt to fulfill the mission God gives them.

Understanding the Cause of Disunity

Ideologically driven disunity is worsened when pastors and church leaders do not understand the root of the issue. On the surface, it appears that disunity arises as believers with differing ideologies consider their viewpoints to be more important than others. It can appear that IDD is caused by stubbornness, arrogance, or animosity. However, these are the symptoms of the cause, not the cause itself. At its core, IDD is caused by fear.

²⁶⁷ Allen Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), Loc. 50, Kindle.

Those who bring disunity are fearful of loss: loss of influence, loss of prominence, or loss of what they feel they once had. Believers taking an ideological stand will often say something like, “The United States is not as Christian as it once was,” or “The church needs to take a stand and be heard.” However, statements such as these are often not focused on true spiritual revival. Rather, they are focused on addressing political, cultural, or ideological expressions. Those who recall the time before the United States became a more postmodern, post-Christian nation will remember when being a person of faith was a more respected position than it currently is. This causes some to try to regain what was lost or prevent further loss, fearing diminished respect and influence.

Another source of fear, related to the first, is the fear of the “other side” winning. Outside of the church, ideological or political discussions often take on a zero-sum game nature—the only way to win is to cause the other to lose. Unfortunately, this mindset has crept into the church as well. Labberton comments

For many conservative evangelicals, changes in theological understandings, social patterns, and moral norms threaten the instinct to control. The perceived loss of control then spawns the impulse to fight back. It isn’t surprising, therefore, that evangelicals have consistently been politically conservative and frequently frame their engagement in politics with the language of apocalypse, fear, and warfare.²⁶⁸

While the church should have a different way of interacting with each other than those outside the church, this often is not the case. Instead of seeking the unity that comes as believers join together to fulfill the Great Commission, being distinct from the vitriol and strife seen in secular culture, the church often is more a reflection of the opposing ideological voices outside the confines of the church. Hilton writes,

²⁶⁸ Labberton, *Still Evangelical?* 61.

As we judge one another, neither Christian side seeks a truce or reconciliation that could lead to collaboration and shared community. And we ought to note how readily we use the language of two sides about the church. Instead of coming together, as Jesus commanded in John 13:34–35 and prayed 17:20–23, left-and right-wing Christians mostly array ourselves on one side of the chasm or the other and push to widen it. In a nation that is still three quarters Christian, right now, we’re the problem.²⁶⁹

How should pastors and church leaders address IDD if the source is fear? Looking to Scripture, one sees that the antidote to fear is not debate, forcefulness, or persuasion. In a passage relating God’s love for His people with their love for each other, John writes, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18, ESV). Rather than falling into the same trap of fearing loss and losing, pastors and church leaders can more effectively address ideologically driven disunity by being people marked by God’s love for His people. Pastoral care, personal conversations, and expressions of love within the body of Christ will bring more unity than debate and factiousness.

Beyond Winners and Losers

Unity in the church is not a matter of winners and losers. It is not based on convincing others of the rightness of our ideological views and the wrongness of theirs. It is based on something much more enduring than a temporary victory that only lasts until the next ideological issue or discussion. Finding unity in the church is an infinite game.

Simon Sinek writes about the difference between finite and infinite games. He draws a distinction between interactions between individuals or groups that have different outcomes. He writes, “Finite games are played by known players. They have fixed rules. And there is an

²⁶⁹ Hilton, *A House United: How the Church Can Save the World*, 30.

agreed-upon objective that, when reached, ends the game.”²⁷⁰ Sinek contrasts this with an infinite game, writing, “Infinite games, in contrast, are played by known and unknown players. There are no exact or agreed-upon rules. Infinite games have infinite time horizons. And because there is no finish line, no practical end to the game, there is no such thing as ‘winning’ an infinite game. In an infinite game, the primary objective is to keep playing, to perpetuate the game.”²⁷¹ There are two important aspects to note. First, each of Sinek’s characteristics of an infinite game apply directly to a pastor’s attempt to address ideologically driven disunity. Second, mistaking an infinite game for a finite game “leads to all kinds of problems, the most common of which include the decline of trust, cooperation, and innovation.”²⁷²

Characteristics of an Infinite Game

An infinite game has five characteristics, each of which, when applied to interactions between believers with differing ideologies, will help pastors and church leaders address IDD. In the focus group and individual interviews, the researcher found that when project participants shared the things that were most helpful in addressing IDD, they almost entirely fell into one of the five characteristics.

²⁷⁰ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 3.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid., 5.

Advance a just cause

The church has the ultimate just cause: glorifying God through fulfilling the Great Commission's charge to make disciples. As stated previously, focusing on fulfilling the Great Commission gives believers with differing ideologies a third, transcendent voice to listen to: the voice of Jesus. In a focus group discussion, Pastor Three²⁷³ said that one of the actions that has helped minimize IDD in his congregation was clarifying the mission and vision of the church. Calling it their "cultural DNA," Pastor Three said clarifying who they are as a congregation and expressing what they believe God is calling them to do gives attenders the ability to join them in advancing their just cause. Pastor One, who leads a church that did not experience much IDD through the COVID-19 pandemic, said that he consistently reminded people of the Great Commission and the church's calling to make disciples. By not falling into the trap of trying to prove someone else's viewpoint wrong, but rather inviting them to join the church in fulfilling the Great Commission, Pastor One addressed and minimized ideologically driven disunity.

Build trusting teams

The quantitative results of the Initial Survey and qualitative results of interviews and focus groups clearly show the importance of relationships in addressing IDD. Sinek refers to this as "Building Trusting Teams." He explains the significance of such teams by writing, "There is a difference between a group of people who work together and a group of people who trust each other. In a group of people who simply work together, relationships are mostly transactional, based on a mutual desire to get things done."²⁷⁴ This is seen in the superficial unity that exists

²⁷³ For anonymity, participants in interviews and focus groups will be referred to by number. The assigned number for each participant will remain consistent throughout the material.

²⁷⁴ Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 105.

when believers have similar enough foundational ideologies that there is no tension when their particular foundational ideology is not threatened. However, when a stressor arises that challenges their ideology, the transactional nature of working together is not sufficient to overcome the pressure to prevent losing position or significance.

Pastor Four stated that the best thing he has done to address ideologically driven disunity is to have “preemptory conversations” while strengthening relationships outside the work of the church. Their leadership team gathers every other week. During these gatherings, they share a meal together and discuss a wide range of topics, including difficult theological and cultural issues. Through these gatherings, they have come to know each other and appreciate each other’s desire to follow Jesus, although they come from a wide range of backgrounds and ideologies. As they have built trust through these conversations, they are able to work together to advance the just cause of the Great Commission.

Study your worthy rivals

On the surface, this is one aspect of Sinek’s approach that doesn’t seem to have a direct correlation to helping a church leader address ideologically driven disunity. However, as one considers what Sinek is saying, its relevance to this discussion becomes clearer. As a pastor or church leader has a discussion with someone with a differing viewpoint, identifying an aspect that is worthy of appreciation can help reduce the temperature of a difficult conversation. While Pastor Four was thankful for the trusting team that works together at his church, he expressed concern that generational differences threaten to undermine trust and unity. As a result, they will be working to appreciate those generational differences by seeking to understand and appreciate them.

It is tempting to think that an ideological difference or disagreement results in the inability to appreciate anything about the person who holds a different ideology. It would benefit pastors and church leaders, however, to learn to identify admirable aspects of the different ideology. The pastor or church leader can then commend the other person on that aspect without embracing all his or her ideology. For example, if someone expresses a desire for the church to take more of a stand on a cultural or political issue, the pastor or church leader can commend the desire for positive change while redirecting the conversation to the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Prepare for existential flexibility

The foundational nature of ideologies often leaves a pastor or church leader in the difficult situation of wrestling with his or her personal deeply held beliefs. The natural inclination to view disagreement as a zero-sum game affects pastors no less than the people who raise ideological disagreements. However, to continue advancing the just cause of fulfilling the Great Commission, pastors and church leaders may need to do exactly what they are asking people in their congregation to do: set aside ideological preferences to focus on the mission. This may take different forms, from adjusting their ideology if they recognize a faulty aspect to temporarily forgoing a conversation or action for the purpose of building unity. Pastor Six expressed this as he recounted the things that have been beneficial in addressing IDD. He referred to “having to choose what battles to fight.” This is an important skill for pastors to acquire as they interact with others who hold differing viewpoints.

Demonstrate the courage to lead

Developing the previous four skills enables a pastor or church leader to have more courage as they navigate situations made more difficult by ideologically driven disunity. Advancing a just cause gives a pastor clarity as to what he and the church are called to do. Trusting teams give the support a pastor needs to have difficult conversations outside of the leadership group. Studying a worthy rival gives a pastor a tool to diffuse a tense conversation by establishing a connection based on admiration. Existential flexibility helps church leaders understand that they do not need to win every ideological discussion, but they can adjust the expression of their own foundational ideology to bring unity. These four characteristics enable a pastor or church leader to lead with courage. Pastor Two identified this trait as one characteristic that helped his church move through the COVID-19 pandemic with little to no IDD. This conservative church in a conservative area followed state guidelines and closed at a point it did not need to. This approach would have brought greater ideologically driven disunity to many congregations; however, Pastor Two believes that confidence and courage in communication helped him to lead through this difficult circumstance with minimal IDD.

Moving On

Pastor Three asked, “How do you know when it’s time to ‘pray someone off?’ How do you do that?” Pastors and church leaders often struggle with how to answer this question. Conversation after conversation and stressful email after stressful email has resulted in little to no resolution or reconciliation. A congregant who is at odds with a decision of the elders or a strategy of the church staff continues to question, challenge, and at times berate. As the tension is much more ideological than theological, the pastor can never answer questions in a way that

satisfies the congregant, leading to more questioning, challenging, and berating. What's the next step for the pastor or church leader? When should that step be taken?

There are no simple answers to these complex questions. The best response is based on so many variables and hypotheticals that a paragraph in a presentation is insufficient to describe it. However, there are some principles that can be applied to help the pastor or church leader take the best next step for everyone involved: pastor, congregant, and congregation. First, pastors and church leaders must realize that they and their congregation have a finite amount of energy, whether that energy is physical, emotional, or spiritual. What they spend on one issue cannot be spent on another. As they consider the next interaction with a congregant stuck in a cycle of IDD, they must weigh the consequences of continuing to expend energy on this situation as opposed to spending energy on their own well-being, that of their family, or that of the rest of the congregation. Second, pastors and church leaders should consider what will increase the congregation's ability to fulfill the Great Commission more, striving to achieve unity with a congregant causing IDD or helping the rest of the congregation see the importance of making disciples. This is often not an easy choice, as it may be a choice between two negative impacts. Additionally, these conversations often are in the context of long-term relationships. Through using the filter of which choice enables the church to fulfill the Great Commission, pastors and church leaders have a clearer framework to guide their decision.

The question as to how to "pray them off" is even less cut and dry. Pastors and church leaders must know the people in their congregation well enough to know how directly the situation can be addressed; some will need to be addressed more directly, while others will require a gentler approach. Whatever the circumstances, there are some things to consider that may be beneficial. First, pastors should look for areas of agreement and admiration. This step can

reduce the severity of IDD. Second, reinforce the mission and vision of the church. Using phrases such as, “We would really love to have you join us in what God has called us to do,” places the burden of whether to stay or leave on the one causing IDD. Third, if someone chooses to leave due to IDD, pastors and church leaders should be careful in asking him or her to stay. This can result in a temporary sense of unity that often masks the continued presence of IDD. As foundational ideologies remain, if a congregant will not join in the mission of the church, the stressful interactions are likely to reoccur.

Conclusion

As the God-ordained shepherds of the congregation, pastors and church leaders are not only called to protect the doctrinal integrity of their local church, but they are also called to steward the resources God has entrusted to the church to fulfill the Great Commission. While financial resources are the most easily understood resource, the people within the congregation and the unity of the body are also resources that God desires to use to glorify himself. Pastors and church leaders fulfill their calling when they address ideologically driven disunity.

Questions to Ask When Addressing IDD

What do I hope to achieve?

What is most important in this discussion?

Who has my back?

How can I develop a trusting team?

What am I overlooking in someone who disagrees with me?

What am I willing to give up?

If I win, what do I lose?

Tools Available for Addressing IDD

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia

This three-week devotional helps the reader understand the centrality of the Great Commission, Jesus' prayer for unity, and the impact of disunity on believers and congregations.

Preaching Materials

Available at www.rmcn.org/e-pluribus-una-ecclesia, these sermon outlines give a structure to communicate the thoughts of the devotional in a church gathering.

Unity Covenant

Attached to this document and available on the project website, this covenant may be used during an evening of prayer. It expresses the Great Commission's charge to make disciples, recognizes the impact of disunity, and commits to specific prayer items.

UNITY COVENANT

Knowing that:

- The mission of the church, given by Jesus in the Great Commission, is to make disciples.
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as the church's unity should reflect the unity within the Trinity.
- Jesus prayed for the unity of the church as the church's unity affirms Jesus' mission to glorify the Father through seeking and saving the lost.
- Unity in the church empowers it to fulfill the mission to which Jesus called it.

I acknowledge and repent of the ways in which I have allowed ideological stances to create disunity within the body of Christ. These may include:

- Finding my identity in ideology rather than in Christ.
- Confusing the expression of faith with the foundation of faith.
- Rejecting a brother or sister in Christ due to differing political stances.
- Placing more value on winning ideological arguments than on loving my brother or sister in Christ.

I commit to:

- Praying for the unity of my church.
- Praying for the mission of my church.
- Praying for the leadership of my church.
- Praying for my brothers and sisters who have different ideologies than I do.
- Focusing on the mission of the church more than the mission of a political ideology.

Today I covenant to keep God's commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all my heart and my soul (2 Kings 23:3).

Name

Date

Notes

Appendix L

Post-Intervention Survey

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia Follow-up Survey

Thank you for your participation in this action research project. Please reflect on how the provided materials have helped you be ready to address ideologically driven disunity (IDD).

* Indicates required question

1. Do you feel better equipped to address Ideologically Driven Disunity as a result of participating in this action research project? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

2. What approximate percentage of the E Pluribus Una Ecclesia Devotional did you complete? *

Mark only one oval.

0%

25%

50%

75%

100%

3. How did you attend the One-Day Presentation? *

Mark only one oval.

In-Person

Livestream

Watched recorded presentation

Have not attended or watched the presentation

4. Which project resource was most helpful as you consider how to address IDD? *

Mark only one oval.

- Devotional
- Initial Survey results given during the Presentation
- Strategy given during the Presentation
- Sermon Series
- Unity Covenant

5. Which survey conclusion (given at the presentation) was the most helpful? *

Mark only one oval.

- IDD exists in multiple environments
- IDD is worsened by events
- IDD is weaker when relationships are stronger
- I did not participate (in-person or virtually) in a presentation

6. Which component of the strategy was most helpful? Please select two. *

Check all that apply.

- Understanding the foundational nature of ideologies
- Identifying your own foundational ideologies
- Finding the "Third Voice" in the Great Commission
- Understanding that disunity is caused by fear
- The Infinite Game—Advance a Just Cause
- The Infinite Game—Build Trusting Teams
- The Infinite Game—Study Your Worthy Rivals
- The Infinite Game—Prepare for Existential Flexibility
- The Infinite Game—Demonstrate the Courage to Lead
- Using the characteristics of the Infinite Game in the illustration of whether to use preferred pronouns
- How to "Pray Someone Off"

7. How likely are you to use the devotional in the congregation you serve? *

Mark only one oval.

Very Unlikely

1

2

3

4

5

Very Likely

8. If you are unlikely to use the devotional, please explain why.

9. How likely are you to use the sermon series? *

Mark only one oval.

Very Unlikely

1

2

3

4

5

Very Likely

10. If you are unlikely to use the sermon series, please explain why.

11. How likely are you to use the unity covenant? *

Mark only one oval.

Very Unlikely

1

2

3

4

5

Very Likely

12. If you are unlikely to use the unity covenant, please explain why.

13. Have you had personal conversations addressing IDD since your participation in this action research project? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

14. If yes, rate the change in your personal conversations addressing IDD since your participation.

Mark only one oval.

More effective

1

2

3

4

5

Less effective

15. If your personal conversations addressing IDD since your participation in this project have been less effective, please explain why.

16. What would have been helpful, but was not addressed? *

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Google Forms

Appendix M

Focus Group Questions

1. How has ideologically driven disunity affected you?
2. How has ideologically driven disunity affected your congregation?
3. What symptoms of ideologically driven disunity have you witnessed in your congregation?
4. How has the staff/lay leadership of your church reacted to ideologically driven disunity?
5. What approaches have you taken to address ideologically driven disunity?
6. What approaches have helped address ideologically driven disunity?
7. What approaches have worsened ideologically driven disunity?
8. How has ideologically driven disunity impacted your church's ability to fulfill the Great Commission?
9. If you could go back in time, what would you do differently?

Appendix N

Research Project Website

5/7/23, 10:16 PM

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia - Rocky Mountain Church Network

**E PLURIBUS UNA ECCLESIA****Live Stream**

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaCybMAimdvGB8VOABmCA4Q/live>

YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaCybMAimdvGB8VOABmCA4Q>

Resources for John Craft's DMin Research Project

To join a live stream of a One-Day Presentation, use the link above. The live stream will be available at the scheduled times below. If you're watching after the presentation, you can find the videos at RMCN's YouTube channel.

Thank you for participating in my DMin research. The purpose of this DMin action research project is to give church leaders a biblical and missional response to the ideologically driven disunity in congregations affiliated with the Rocky Mountain Church Network.

On this page, you will find links to the required devotional. You can either download a PDF file or purchase a Kindle (\$0.99) or paperback (\$4.99) version from Amazon. For a short time, the Kindle version will be free. It is also free if you have a subscription to Kindle Unlimited. If you would like to order multiple copies of the paperback version, contact me at [REDACTED].

You will also find a link for the Initial Survey. As the project progresses, you will also find a link for the Follow-Up Survey. Please note that you must complete the Consent Form you

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received via email in order to complete the surveys. If you do not have access to the email containing the link to your Consent Form, please contact me at [REDACTED].

This page includes dates and locations for the one-day presentations in Taylorsville, UT, Broomfield, CO, and Sheridan, WY.

Thank you for your participation. I hope and pray that this project will give church leaders in RMCN the tools they need to help bring unity so that the Great Commission is fulfilled in our churches.

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia–Daily Devotional

Feel free to share this resource with anyone. If you would like to make a bulk purchase, contact me at [REDACTED]. Choose either the free **PDF Version** or purchase at **Amazon**.

Initial Survey

The Initial Survey is designed to gauge the presence and impact of ideologically driven disunity in congregations affiliated with RMCN. Please respond as thoroughly as possible.

The survey is anonymous. The only data collected upon completion of the form are your answers and the time you completed the survey. The first question of the survey pertains to whether you have completed the Consent Form. You cannot proceed until the Consent Form is completed. The survey can be found **here**.

One-Day Presentations

These gatherings will present the results of the research and unpack strategies for addressing ideologically driven disunity. The locations were chosen as they function as primary geographic hubs for RMCN. All project participants are required to attend, either in person or virtually. The presentations are open to anyone and may be of particular benefit to pastoral staff, church leadership (elders, deacons, trustees, etc), and key congregants.

Taylorsville, UT–April 13, 10:00 am – 2:00 pm

Intermountain Baptist Church–4770 S 1950 W, Taylorsville, UT 84129

Broomfield, CO–April 18, 10:00 am – 2:00 pm

Good News Community Church–5511 W 136th Ave, Broomfield, CO 80020

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Sheridan, WY–April 20, 10:00 am – 2:00 pm

First Baptist Church–[3161 Big Horn Avenue, Sheridan, WY 82801](#)

One-Day Presentation Handout

Project participants will receive this handout, covering the data from the Initial Survey and detailing a strategy for addressing ideologically driven disunity, at the One-Day Presentations. A **PDF Version** is also available.

One-Day Presentation Book List

The One-Day Presentation contained a number of quotes. A PDF Book List can be found **here**.

E Pluribus Una Ecclesia Sermon Series

These three sermons work in conjunction with the three-week devotional.

[United In Mission–Matthew 28](#)

[A Prayer for Unity–John 17](#)

[What If We Don't–1 Corinthians 1 & 3; James 4](#)

[Presentation \(PowerPoint or Keynote\) Title Image](#)

[Presentation \(PowerPoint or Keynote\) Background Image](#)

Note: I typed these sermons as if I were preaching them. As preaching notes are very individual, they may be different that what you typically use. Take the information, add your own illustrations, and make them your own.

Follow-Up Survey

Please consider the effectiveness of the devotional, the presentation, the unity covenant, the sermon series, and the rest of the resources found on this page. If you need a refresher, the Presentation Handout contains the results of the Initial Survey, as well as conclusions and the strategy for addressing IDD. The Follow-Up Survey is designed to gauge how prepared you feel to address IDD, as well as the effectiveness of the various components.

The Follow-Up Survey can be found **here**.

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IRB Approval Letter

June 13, 2022

John Craft
Jacob Dunlow

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY21-22-1194 E Pluribus Una Ecclesia: Addressing Ideologically Driven Disunity Through a Multifaceted Approach

Dear John Craft and Jacob Dunlow,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

(2) Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not “designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. **If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.**

If you have any questions about this determination or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your application’s status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office