

## CHURCH GROWTH AND OUTREACH LESSONS FROM THE OIL BOOM IN NORTH DAKOTA

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### ***Abstract***

Using primary data collected from four churches situated in the North Dakota towns of Williston and Watford City, this study considers how the outreach ministries of these churches have been affected by the massive population growth brought about by the oil boom in the Bakken region. Drawing from the survey responses provided by the leaders of these congregations, the study concludes that people engaged in new outreach ministries can apply several lessons, including the definition of evangelism, the importance of relationship building, the need for multifaceted teams and resources, and issues with denominational support.

The Bakken Formation was named for Henry O. Bakken, who originally discovered oil on his farm in Tioga, North Dakota, in 1951. It covers 200,000 square miles, stretching through southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba in Canada to the northeastern corner of Montana and almost the entire northwestern quarter of North Dakota.

Despite knowledge of this oil-rich region being widespread, the oil reserves remained relatively untapped for over half a century, because of the difficulty and expense involved in drilling in the Bakken. This changed in 2010 for two reasons. First, the advent of horizontal drilling and fracking technology allowed greater access to the oil than conventional drilling. Second, the spike in oil prices during the late 2000s and early 2010s made greater oil exploration and production within the United States profitable.

The result was a swift movement into the Bakken. From 2010 to 2015, the total number of barrels of oil produced in the region rose from approximately 200,000 per day to 1.2 million per day.

While the lower oil prices of the mid-2010s has caused this initial growth to plateau in the Bakken, the transformation brought by the oil boom has been felt on an enormous scale. Oil from the Bakken now makes up nearly ten percent of the United States' domestic oil production. The state of North Dakota has reaped a massive economic windfall, including an unemployment rate near zero and a billion dollar surplus in the state budget.

The Bakken oil boom also brought massive changes to the population in the Bakken region, especially in North Dakota. Oil companies needed to recruit a large workforce, and the relatively inhospitable climate, combined with the rush to get as much oil as possible out of the ground while prices were high in the early 2010s, led to companies paying a premium for anyone who would work in the oil fields. It was common in the early days of the oil boom for truck drivers, for example, to be paid one hundred dollars per hour.

The high wages attracted tens of thousands of people from around the United States and overseas. Many of these people came to the cities of Williston, North Dakota, and Watford City, North Dakota, both of which sit near the center of the Bakken Formation. As a result, the populations of these cities mushroomed. According to the US Census Bureau, while the United States population as a whole increased 3.3% from 2010 to 2014, the state of North Dakota increased 9.9% during those same four years,<sup>1</sup> and the city of Williston grew 54.4%.<sup>2</sup> Watford City, including those who moved into the rural areas surrounding the city, recorded an over 200% increase in population between 2013 and the end of 2015.<sup>3</sup>

This glut of new people has overtaxed the small town infrastructures, which were not prepared for such a large number of people arriving in such a short timespan. Housing has become scarce, leading to a rapid rise in prices and property taxes for existing residents, as well as the construction of man camps and lodges where the primarily single men flooding the area can stay. Even with the scramble to accommodate these new people, those who are unprepared can find themselves arriving in Williston or Watford City with their cars as their only shelter.

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<sup>1</sup> "State & County QuickFacts: North Dakota," United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/38000.html>, accessed November 24, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "State & County QuickFacts: Williston (city), North Dakota," United States Census Bureau. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/38/3886220.html>, accessed November 24, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> "Watford City Community Profile," Watford City, North Dakota Community Profile, [http://watford.mckenziecounty.net/Services.aspx?ID=Community\\_Profile](http://watford.mckenziecounty.net/Services.aspx?ID=Community_Profile), accessed November 24, 2015.

No less staggered by the influx of people and money to the Bakken were the churches. From ministering in the confined context of small North Dakota towns, the churches have found themselves at the center of a massive demographic transformation that greatly widens their potential scope of outreach. The oil boom has brought an enormous opportunity for evangelism and church growth to their front doors.

## METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

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This study, conducted by Mark Teasdale and Steve Trefz, provides a preliminary set of observations about how churches have responded to the population influx to the Bakken region. Mark Teasdale is the E. Stanley Jones Associate Professor of Evangelism at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. His primary work was gathering and analyzing the data from the surveys. Steve Trefz is the Conference Equipper of Lay Ministries for the Dakotas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. He is a lifelong Dakotan who is an expert on rural ministry in the Dakotas and is well connected with pastors and churches in North and South Dakota. His primary work was providing the historical and social background for the study and making certain the survey was culturally appropriate.

Together, we developed surveys and sent them via email to twelve churches in Williston and Watford City. We identified these churches based on Trefz's contacts in the area as well as from an Internet search for churches listed in Williston or Watford City. We set no parameters on the churches we selected, other than their location in proximity to one of the two towns. Four of the churches responded.

The four churches included two church starts, one in Williston and one in Watford City, and two established churches, both in Williston. The founding pastors were our correspondents with the new church starts. The senior pastor was our correspondent for one of the established churches. For the other established church, we were put in touch with the leader of a ministry that was launched specifically to reach out to those drawn to the region because of the oil boom. The four churches represented three different Protestant denominations. One of the church starts and the established church with the new outreach were from the same denomination.

Church 1 was founded in early 2015 and meets at a local bar and grill in Watford City. It was founded out of a desire, as the founding pastor explained it, to reach "un-churched people who desire to lay claim to Watford City as their new home for the next few years." As of the end of 2015, the church welcomed between twelve and twenty-four people to its regular worship services. The focus is on reaching young adults.

Church 2 is located in Williston. The pastor had grown up in a part of Montana encompassed by the Bakken Formation, but he had left to minister in other parts of the country. Recognizing the oil boom was creating a

new mission field in his home region, he moved to North Dakota and established a new church in early 2014. As he explained it, “I saw the growth taking place and knew this was going to be a place where people would be coming. Also, realizing that often when people move there is more of an openness to consider spiritual things.” As of the end of 2015, the church meets in space rented from a local civic group and has thirty to fifty people in attendance weekly.

Church 3 is an established church that has been in Williston for over fifty years. It has seen its worship attendance double from 2010 to 2015, with equal increases in the number of people participating in children’s ministries, adult Sunday school classes, and small groups. Participants in the youth ministries have tripled. This church has been in a consistent growth mode, expanding its programs and facilities to accommodate this growth. As of the end of 2015, it has just over one thousand people worshipping weekly.

Church 4 is an established church, but the particular ministry with which I was put in touch had only been in existence since January 2014. The church launched this ministry as part of a denominational initiative to reach those coming to the Bakken region. The church hired a new staff member to serve as a home missionary who would coordinate the outreach to the new population, especially those in need. This work takes the primary form of serving weekly dinners, offering a worship service following the meal, and providing necessary items such as clothes, winter gear, and blankets. Since its inception, this ministry has attracted approximately forty to fifty people to the dinners and following service.

The correspondents from churches 1 and 4 were both colleagues of Trefz. To avoid any discomfort on their part in answering the surveys, all survey data was sent directly to Teasdale without Trefz being involved in the collection of the data.

While such a small sample set precludes generalizations about ministry in the Bakken region, there are several commonalities in the data from these four churches. Likewise, several points were surprising that are suggestive of the need for additional research. Together, these offer insight for those seeking to launch new ministries to new populations.

## COMMON THEMES

*Need to be comfortable with evangelism, not set in a specific definition of it*

The word “evangelism” is one that people can shy away from even when it is an appropriate description of their ministries. This is especially true for people in North Dakota. The term “evangelism” is one that many churches in the area eschew in favor of words like “outreach.”

The correspondents from all four churches were not so reticent in their language, though. While none of them use the term “evangelism” in their

public material, including their websites and social media presence, all of them were comfortable using the term in the survey. They unanimously responded in the affirmative when asked, “Would you consider your work to be evangelism?”

While the correspondents were quick to claim the term, they did not agree as to what evangelism entailed, pointing to different practices as being part of evangelism. The pastor of Church 1 was careful to couch her practice of evangelism in relational terms, separating her ministry from negative stereotypes of evangelism, “Evangelism evokes pictures of protestors and people on street corners handing out brochures. I meet my friends in RV parks, bars, thrift center events, and the like ... and I do not try to convert them ... I simply try to love them and invest in them as valued human beings so they might know and experience the love of God through me.”

The pastor of Church 2 responded that he “primarily” understood his work as evangelism. Like the pastor of Church 1, though, he wanted to be clear that his evangelism was not reduced to a stereotyped version of evangelism. In his case, it was being clear that his evangelism blessed people in tangible ways as well as spiritually. More than saving souls, he explained, “We do want our work to broaden ... and really make a difference in this community that is physically noticeable.”

Church 3, as a larger, established church, understood evangelism as equipping its members to reach out to others. According to the pastor, this church began to feel a calling from God to start preparing for an influx of new residents as early as the 1990s. In response, the leadership made a commitment to emphasize outreach to new people over maintaining a comfortable community for existing members. As the pastor explained it, “The Great Commission is not about preservation, but about going, growing and giving ourselves to the world.” Evangelism, then, is something in which the church provides the training and encouragement for the people to do.

Ironically, Church 4, which has a ministry that is focused on meeting physical needs, was the one church that adhered most closely to what might be understood as a traditional view of evangelism. The staff member leading the ministry explained that this ministry was evangelism, “because we share God’s love both through our actions and our words—daily.” Perhaps because the ministry focuses on meeting physical needs, they wanted to be clear that they understand their work as equally evangelistic as inviting people to eternal salvation.

The responses from all four churches suggest that those who want to do ministry with new populations need a strong commitment to evangelism coupled with an open-ended understanding of what evangelism entails. As the ministry leader in Church 4 expressed, evangelism needs to have a more holistic focus, one that allows churches to share God’s love through actions and words without being prescriptive as to what actions and words are used. Rather than seeing different approaches to evangelism as competitive, those

involved in outreach ministries should see them as complementary.<sup>4</sup> Each offers the good news of Jesus Christ in a different way that, together, make for a fuller expression of the gospel.

*Need to be relational, not focused on resource conservation*

None of the correspondents believed their respective ministries would grow automatically because of increasing population in the region. Instead, all of them understood that building relationships was the cornerstone of their ministry work. This did not preclude the use of broader forms of marketing to attract people, but the careful cultivation of individual relationships took precedent in the work of these churches.

The pastor of Church 1 explained this when she wrote that her primary work is “A lot of hospitality! ... Our main focus is on building community.” The pastor of Church 2 agreed, stating, “We have done a lot of outreach cookouts ... We just try to invest in the lives of the people we have and constantly try to build new relationships.” The ministry leader in Church 4 wrote that, along with passing out necessities, “we provide the caring listening ears and hearts to our guests.” Church 3 used its larger resources to emphasize the development of small groups, as well as seminars and retreats for specific purposes such as marriage building and financial stability. In doing this, they sought to provide greater opportunity for relationships to develop within the church. They also emphasized the need for the people in the church to build relationships with people outside the church as part of their Christian witness.

Emphasizing relationship building required that all the churches dedicate their resources to this work. For Church 3, this came in the form of substantially increasing the budget, staff, and facilities to undergird the development of new small groups. For Church 1 and Church 2, which have more limited resources because of their recent founding and small numbers, the demand for resources falls squarely on the pastors. This causes them to dedicate much of their time and space to other people, including making heavy use of their own homes to host people. The pastor of Church 1 explained, “most of our ministry is done from inside our home. We have groups over 2–4 times a week. This includes Bible studies, girl’s nights, couple’s nights, and special events like baby-showers.” Alongside of this, the pastor and her husband attend the local Rotary Club gatherings to meet people.

The pastor in Church 2 agreed with the need to use his family’s home as a ministry site. “We have done a lot of outreach cookouts. I tell people that

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Richardson explores how different forms of evangelistic practice can work in tandem with one another in his article, “Evangelism and Social Capital: The Bridge-Building and Bridge-Breaking Dimensions of Different Paradigms and Practices of Witness,” *Witness* 28 (2014): 5–30.

you can ask people to your home until you're blue [in the face] and they'll say no. Tell them you're cooking out with hot-dogs and you will have thirty say, 'What can I bring?'" Beyond these larger gatherings, the pastor commits his time to doing a lot of one-on-one follow up with the people he has met. This takes place primarily at mealtimes, especially over breakfast or lunch, as well as through texting.

The ministry at Church 3, by its nature, has not required the same shifting of resources to strengthen its relationship building. In part, this is because the ministry was part of a denominational effort. However, the congregation that housed this new ministry did have to hire new staff members to lead this ministry and to provide the necessary space and financial support to make the ministry operable.

Relationship building is an essential activity for churches that want to make inroads with new populations. What these four churches show is that developing relationships requires a substantial investment of resources. This is true regardless of the size of a church. Pastors of new churches should expect to give enormous time and effort, sacrificing much of their private space, if they are to build solid relationships. Established congregations and denominations need to increase their financial, staff, and facility investment substantially, demonstrating to their existing members that creating new relationships both inside and outside of the church is a priority. There is no way around this. It is clear that any attempt to reach people apart from this intentional and well-resourced relationship building will lead to a failed outreach effort.

#### *Need for a team, not just a vision for outreach*

Highly committed leaders who have a clear vision for evangelism and who are willing to sacrifice their own resources to build relationships are essential to reach a new group of people successfully. However, if the ministry is to grow, that ministry needs to increase its carrying capacity beyond what those committed leaders can accomplish on their own.

At this point, there is a separation between the church starts and the established churches, with the former being almost solely reliant on their respective pastors and the latter having the cushion of a larger staff and corps of volunteers from which to draw.

The pastors of churches 1 and 2 both recognize that after positive initial starts, they are bumping up against their own limitations in relating to people. For Church 1, these limitations come in the form of the initial group of people the pastor gathered becoming insular. She explains she has been surprised by how she found herself "making relationships with people who don't want to take the time and energy to make relationships with others. I did not expect a bubble/cliqish effect to occur. We met a handful of people who were unattached to the community and without friends. Once we connected them with each other they were comfortable enough to stay there

instead of reaching out to others. It's draining trying to keep up those relationships and be a lone-ranger in building other relationships or trying to get them to build other relationships."

The pastor of Church 2 has found his limitations as the people he has befriended have begun to turn to him for help ordering their lives. Feeling more equipped to preach and teach, he struggles with those who are not applying his message to their daily lives. "Often I feel helpless especially in counseling. The old adage you can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink is true. You can offer hope to people. Give them insight and encourage them to change, but when it comes down to it they have to follow God's Word and often people would rather live 'broken.' People live from crisis to crisis expecting temporary relief when what God offers can provide real change and peace."

Both these pastors have a clear vision for evangelizing the new population in the Bakken region and are committed to expending their personal resources to build the relationships necessary to do this. However, without a team of people who can likewise see that vision and work toward it, they are stymied in their work. For both pastors, helping their new church members grasp and live out the vision they have for full lives in relationship with God and others is elusive because they have to expend so much of their work on just developing and maintaining new relationships.

Churches 3 and 4 demonstrate no difficulty in this area. Already multi-staff organizations, they had the existing size and structure to claim the vision of reaching out to the new population and to organize themselves around that work. When they encountered limitations, they had sufficient resources, both internally and, in the case of Church 4, provided by the denomination, to expand their staff to overcome these. Likewise, they were able to tap their established congregations to activate volunteers who could assist the staff. Church 3 provides the best example of how important a committed existing congregation is in prosecuting an evangelistic outreach. Although formal church membership in 2015 stands at only 186 people for Church 3, it has slightly over 1,000 people who attend worship services each week. Church members who understand and are committed to the vision of building relationships with others are invaluable.

Those who desire to build relationships as part of an evangelistic outreach to a new population will benefit from having a larger team of people to help with the process. While starting with a highly motivated individual may provide an effective way to make initial progress in building relationships and forming a small community, a team of people who can help move that initial community to another level of growth and stability is necessary. As seen from Church 2, having people on the team that possess a variety of ministry gifts and skills would be helpful to address new needs that appear within the nascent community.

### *Need for resources, not administrative overhead*

The previous section demonstrates that the more people a church has involved in ministry, the better equipped it is to carry out its vision of evangelizing a new population. The difference between the larger staffs and congregations of the two established churches contrasted to the lone pastors of the two church starts is evidence of this. The same advantage applies to other resources, as well. This is especially clear when comparing the resources each of the church starts had at the beginning of their respective ministries.

Church 1 launched relying on denominational support, but this was relatively small. According to the pastor, “though our rent and water was/is paid, we had no help moving up here and had to pay for all ministry expenses out of our personal pockets for the first six months. Now we have a credit card with a \$2,000 monthly limit for ministry expenses. We still pay for electricity, phone, Internet on our own. We do have health insurance but it doesn’t cover much since we have not reached our deductible and it doesn’t include dental.”

The pastor of Church 2 launched apart from any denominational aid, preferring to raise the money himself. He explained that before launching the church, “we traveled for over a year raising support. We have close to twenty churches and a number of individuals that support the ministry. That being said, we came out undersupported.” In spite of not meeting his goal, he has found that the funds he raised have been sufficient for his work, stating, “We have never had to ask whether we had enough money. In fact, we have put a lot of money away for a down payment on land.”

Having the funds to carry out ministry is clearly helpful for a new church. It frees the pastor from the day-to-day worry of having sufficient money both for personal support and for engaging in ministry. However, even if Church 1 had ample funds to cover salary, benefits, and basic ministry expenses provided by the denomination, it is not clear this would alleviate all the distractions the pastor has. Again, contrasting churches 1 and 2 is helpful in showing this.

The pastor of Church 2 had to delay starting his new church for over a year in order to secure financial support. However, once that work was done, he was relatively free to pursue his ministry. Presumably, he needs to provide regular updates, requests for continued support, and expressions of gratitude to his supporters, but these would be relatively straightforward after putting in the initial time to cultivate the donors.

Church 1 is in a different situation. In order to accept the support of the denomination, the pastor must set aside time and energy to fulfill the administrative duties attached to that support. That these duties have become onerous to her became clear when she answered a question about what she felt least prepared for in her ministry, “I feel least prepared to handle the financial end of ministry and everything that comes with being apart of the denomination—APR, Medical reimbursement, keeping track

of all receipts for different accounts then getting those receipts to the correct people when needed, all the different taxes we have to fill out for different parts of our ministries, etc.” She elaborated on this later when answering a question on what she felt would be most helpful for her in her ministry, stating emphatically that she would hire “A SECRETARY!!!! That would be my ultimate resource! He/She could take care of all the denominational needs—like finances, taxes, conference meetings, etc. ... He/She could keep track of all the receipts, scan and file them, then send them to the correct people.”

While having substantial resources when starting a new church or ministry is enormously helpful, those resources can create as many problems as they resolve if they have too much administrative overhead connected to them. This does not conclusively argue that self-supporting ministries are preferable to those that are denominationally or congregationally supported. Churches 3 and 4, both of which have the support of larger institutions, have been able to reach more people and provide wider arrays of outreach ministries to the people in the Bakken region. However, it does suggest that institutional support can be as much a hindrance as a help to small churches, especially those with lone pastors who must care for the administrative burden that comes with that support over and above their chief ministry of building relationships. Denominational and congregational leaders who are considering how to reach new populations should keep this in mind as they develop the processes by which they will support any new ministries.

#### *Need for optimism, not foolhardiness*

Regardless of the difficulties that each church has faced, all of the correspondents see the need for their respective ministries and are hopeful about the future. This makes sense. Launching a new church or a new ministry within an existing church is necessarily a forward-looking activity. Without hope for the future, the entire enterprise would never get off the ground.

However, this optimism is not divorced from the correspondents recognizing the challenges that their ministries have before them. The pastor of Church 2 offered the stark observation that of eight to ten church starts he was aware of in the Williston area, only two had not folded. This was in spite of the vast number of people moving to the area and the fact that he estimated only three percent of those people attended any church.

To be effective in this vast mission field, the pastor of Church 2 stated that he most wanted to purchase or construct a church building. “We definitely need our own place. In church planting there are always people on the outside thinking, ‘Are they going to make it? If they had their own building I would commit.’ ... There is that security aspect of a building that people seem to hold to.” Given the high prices of real estate in the Williston area because of the oil boom, the pastor is aware that purchasing property is no

small feat. Still, he is saving money toward this goal, and he believes that his church will be sustainable if he can make it happen.

The pastor of Church 1 is more concerned about the need for drawing her existing congregants into the vision of building relationships with new people. Musing on this issue, she wrote, “Every day I think I’m on the edge of great failure or great success. If I could get help forming relationships outside of our clique, I think this will be a great success and be sustainable without me in the coming years. If I continue to be the only one investing in people outside our group of twelve there will be trouble.” Added to this was her frustration with the administrative overhead that came with denominational support. She reiterated that she needed “someone to help with secretary and household needs.” If she could hire such a person, it “would free up my time to form more meaningful and intentional relationships and be involved in more community events/activities. I feel like the things I mentioned above keep me stuck at home behind a desk rather than out with people.” With this additional time to build new relationships and to prompt her existing congregation to develop relationships, she thinks her church would have a solid future.

Paraphrasing Jesus, the ministry leader at Church 4 explained her ministry would always be necessary “because the poor will always be among us.” However, finding ways to sustain the ministry would require adapting to “the total flux of daily life” in the Bakken region. She explained several ways her ministry would have to do this. It would include learning to relate to the boom and bust job cycle (when oil is more expensive, the companies hire more people to pump more, but when the price of oil falls, the companies lay off people to save money). It would also require creating a more effective system for dealing with the transient nature of the population. While the overall population of the Bakken oil region is growing, it is not because the same people are staying there while new people are coming. Rather, there is a “constant flow” of people heading in and out of the area. Further complicating this is that “people from all 50 states and all over the world [are] coming to the Bakken in search of a better life.” Dealing with issues like language and culture become necessary for her to make her ministry more effective in reaching out to a wider cross-section of the people in the region. Otherwise, the ministry will remain a relatively small outreach caring for a relatively small number of people who can access it.

Church 3 seemed to have the most stable and positive outlook. They attributed this to intentionally preparing to reach out to new populations coming to the Bakken region as early as the 1990s. This gave them a strong base of members and resources to launch their outreach once the oil boom began in 2010. Even with this, the church leaders have recognized the need to stay focused so they do not become complacent in their outreach. As such, they have sought experts to advise the church on how to remain effective as the impact of the oil boom continues to unfold.

A balance of optimism and situational awareness is something that the leaders of all four churches have in common. This is an essential trait for leaders seeking to launch new outreach ministries. Without the hope of God moving, the ministry lacks the power to be effective. Without situational awareness, the ministry can founder on the rocks of very real threats that face it.

While the small sample of churches surveyed does not allow the five themes explored above to be set as conclusive observations about ministry in the Bakken region over the past five years, they do offer helpful insights for those who are considering outreach ministries with new populations. There are lessons both for those who would launch new churches and for those who work in existing congregations or denominations that want to support these sorts of launches.

### **SURPRISES REQUIRING ADDITIONAL RESEARCH**

Along with the common themes that these four churches demonstrated in their ministries, several additional questions and observations arose from the correspondents' responses. We offer these to prompt future research either on ministries in the Bakken region or in relation to evangelism and outreach ministries more broadly.

- Three of the four churches were involved in caring for people's physical needs in some way, with Church 4 specifically having a ministry dedicated to this. In all cases, the churches met specific immediate needs, such as housing, emergency help with utilities, food, or cold weather clothing. Would more focused or holistic efforts on caring for physical needs make a difference in outreach ministries?
- Aside from the ministry leader at Church 3 stating that she would like to provide for transitional housing and job training to combat "both situational and generational poverty," the churches did not show any focus on addressing social, political, or economic issues. Would church participation in these arenas help them with their outreach?
- While only two of the four churches owned buildings, all four saw value in having specific places that they could identify as where their community gathered. How important is a defined space for outreach ministries? Does the severe climate of northern North Dakota make having a space more important than in other climates?
- All of the churches reported some engagement with other congregations from a variety of denominations. The pastor of Church 1 even stated that she had formed a mentoring relationship with a more experienced pastor of another church start in Watford City. Could these cross-denominational relationships between congregations be built upon to develop an overarching strategy to reach the vast new

population in the Bakken region without impugning the need for each church to grow on its own?

- All four of the churches assumed traditional job descriptions for pastors, including preaching, teaching, and caregiving. All churches also had that job description challenged. When the established churches faced situations that required moving beyond the work usually attributed to the pastor, they hired staff that could handle the new needs. However, the pastors of the church starts could not bring on new staff. They needed to take on the new and unexpected activities by trying to learn the needed skills. In both cases, it required an outlay of time and money to gain the skills the pastors did not have at the outset. It is not surprising that the skills the pastors had correlate directly to the curriculum taught in most seminaries. How might pastors who anticipate work in outreach ministry, especially as founding pastors of new churches, be better prepared for that work in seminary and supported with better training while in the field?
- Two of the churches were part of a denomination that announced a desire to raise more than a million dollars over three years to fund outreach to the new population in the Bakken region. However, the speed with which new people were entering the area required ministries to get started immediately. Is there a way that denominations can fast track their support for new outreach ministries while also cutting the administrative overhead that comes with that support so the people they send can focus on their ministry?
- All the churches, except Church 4, which cared for whoever came to the meals, focused their ministry efforts at attracting young families or young singles. Although race and ethnic breakdowns were not part of this study, it is likely that these churches further narrowed their focus to white, English-speaking Americans. This fits with standard assumptions as to who would be the “high growth potential” people to welcome into a congregation. When seeking to reach out to a new population that is diverse, how might new outreach ministries find ways to connect with a variety of people, including those who might require additional support with language translation, financial needs, or cultural adaptation?

The Bakken region offers a rare glimpse of how churches can respond to a rapidly growing influx of a wide variety of peoples into a specific location. The compressed time and space of the demographic growth demands an almost instinctive response from the church, forcing it to act quickly and decisively rather than pausing to deliberate and develop a full strategy. The findings from this study show that the church is capable of raising up committed people who are willing to sacrifice a great deal to reach out into these situations. At the same time, its institutional structures can be slow or uncomprehending about how best to support these people by equipping

them, freeing them to focus on building relationships, or providing greater resources for their work. However, when the institutional structure of the church can order itself missionally, it can launch people very effectively, leading to greater evangelistic outreach and church growth.

### **About the Authors**

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