

WAYS TO CREATE A PROCESS TO DEVELOP A DENOMINATIONAL  
PROFILE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN  
PUERTO RICO

A Professional Project submitted to the Theological School of Drew University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree,

Doctor of Ministry

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Madison, New Jersey

November 2016

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **WAYS TO CREATE A PROCESS TO DEVELOP A DENOMINATIONAL PROFILE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN PUERTO RICO**

By Geritza Olivella

How can a denomination grow? How can a denomination help local congregations to create a vision for the future? What can a denomination do to provide essential tools for ministers and leaders in Puerto Rico to train them and help them grow? The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico has new challenges during times of migration, and economic, social, political, and spiritual crisis. We are faced with a decrease in population while there is a church that wants to grow. This project responds to the need of an awakening among Pastors, lay leaders, and as denomination. In order to grow, we need to have a vision, be relevant, and examine everything we do as a church.

The creation of a process to develop a denominational profile can help a denomination to make changes, and help the strengthening of local congregations. The development of a denominational profile can guide a denomination to develop a new vision based on their strengths, opportunities, and challenges. During this process, we took into consideration the cultural and historic context of Puerto Rico, and the voices of ministers, and lay leaders of diverse Disciples of Christ congregations in Puerto Rico. This process can be used as a template for other denominations that may want to come up with a new vision as part of their discernment process.

The purpose of this project is not to reveal a *one size fits all* recipe for church growth. It is about discernment. The only key for church growth is to discern the will of God in our congregations and communities. This project can guide a denomination to have a diverse and healthy church. It may also serve as a guide for a denomination to engage every congregation in discerning what God wants them to do in their communities, regardless of how many members they have. We need to pray, study the Word of God, and serve others. God will do the rest.

DEDICATION

To Mami y Papi

(Mom and Dad)

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## AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful for the grace from God. In His mercy I have found love, peace and a new life. Therefore, I dedicate this project to the Lord. He has given me everything; my life, family, and ministry belong to Him.

I would like to thank my parents Itza and Gerardo, and also my brother Gerito for their support and their prayers. *Gracias Mami y Papi por enseñarme a amar a Dios sobre todas las cosas y enseñarme lo que es el servicio y testimonio.* Thanks mom and dad for teaching me to love the Lord above all things and what service and testimony are about.

Thanks to my dearest husband David for being by my side and giving me strength to pursue my dreams. Thank you for being a wonderful husband and for understanding the pastoral ministry that God entrusted in our hands.

I will always be grateful for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico. This is a church that believes in education and sowed in me the Gospel seed. I feel honored to be a minister of this denomination and I give God the glory.

Thanks to the Lay Advisory Committee members and The Reverend Miguel A. Morales, our General Minister, for their faith in this project.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

How can a church grow when the population of the country is decreasing? What can a Pastor do to strengthen a congregation? What can a lay leader do to help others grow and mature?

Puerto Rico is dealing with a serious migration situation. During the year 2014, a total of 84,000 people left Puerto Rico and moved to the United States. That same year, 20,000 people left the United States and moved to Puerto Rico. This means a 1.8% population decrease in Puerto Rico<sup>1</sup>. This migration issue has grown in 2015 and 2016. Puerto Rico is struggling with economic, social, political and spiritual problems. Despite these factors, the church has to continue its work and the preaching of the Gospel. The Word of God is still pertinent to the human being. It brings hope and peace in a world of crisis, desperation, and anxiety.

For this and many other reasons, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico has a new challenge. As a denomination, we have to be prepared at all times.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto L. Velázquez, *Perfil del Migrante 2014*. (Puerto Rico: Instituto de Estadísticas de Puerto Rico, 2016), 4.

We need to consider what we do and examine our purpose as a denomination. We ought to scrutinize everything we do in ministry and we must know what is happening in our communities. A church that stops growing will eventually die.

We are facing a decreasing population and a church that wants to grow. This project responds to a much needed awakening that needs to happen among Pastors, lay leaders, and in our denomination. In order to grow we need to have a vision. How come we have dedicated Pastors with dying congregations? Does this mean they are not doing their work? Do they have a romantic and simplistic perspective about church growth? Is having a dream enough to make a church grow? Are the ministry resources provided by the denomination for local churches inadequate for our times?

We have great Pastors and lay leaders in our congregations who are frustrated because they continue to work, but do not see any positive changes. If this is happening, as a denomination, we need to provide the essential tools designed to strengthen our congregations. In order to do this, we need to know what we are dealing with. We need to know what we are doing well and what we need to improve.

This project focuses on the process a denomination can use to create a denominational profile. It is a process of self-evaluation that will guide denominations that wish to develop new strategies, tools, and recommendations to strengthen their congregations. It is important to have a vision. “You cannot have a superficial vision for a large church. A shallow vision will not make your church grow. The vision must eat you up and burn within your soul.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dag Heward-Mills, *Church Growth* (Parchment House, 2011), Kindle Edition.

I have a vision. I see a growing church. I see a mature church preaching with its testimony all over Puerto Rico. As a denomination, we have not seen a significant decline in membership, but we need to be prepared. The declining population in Puerto Rico will not determine or stop church growth. But we need to do our part. God will grant us the growth.

## CHAPTER 2

### HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN PUERTO RICO

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) began in 1832 as a restoration movement in the United States of America. The January 1832 meeting at Lexington, Kentucky, united the Reformer and Christian movements, and the combination began a period of development, which ultimately changed its character.<sup>1</sup> A new denomination was born and it started growing very quickly throughout the United States and Latin America. According to McAllister and Tucker: “Expansion took place in publishing, in education, and in district, state, and national organization.”<sup>2</sup>

Juan Figueroa Umpierre states “the founders of this denominations hoped to restore Christian unity by returning to the New Testament faith and practices.”<sup>3</sup> Joaquín Vargas agrees and explains,

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<sup>1</sup> Lester G. McAllister and William E. Tucker, *Journey in Faith. A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1975), 159.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Figueroa Umpierre and Luis F. Del Pilar, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico. Nuestro Perfil Histórico*, (Puerto Rico: Iglesia Cristiana Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico, 2008), 23.

In 1898 the Hispano-American War began. This had a big impact on Puerto Rico. We were a colony of Spain and as the result of the Treaty of Paris; Puerto Rico was assigned to the United States of America as a colony. Next year, Reverend E. A. Erwin and his wife arrived to Puerto Rico as missionaries of the American Christian Missionary Society (ACMS). They began to learn Spanish and started a Bible School in the town of Bayamón.<sup>4</sup>

The Protestant missionaries had to face the opposition of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico and the rise of unemployment and violence. After a couple of months, The Reverend Erwin decided to quit the mission and became a judge in the government court. The Reverend Taylor and his wife replaced him. They organized a congregation in Bayamón, but they quit two years later.

In 1899, four months after the arrival of the missionaries, Puerto Rico suffered one of the worst hurricanes in history, *San Ciriaco*. This was a devastating hurricane. More than 3,000 people died. The majority of the people lost their homes as well as family members. Vargas explains, “There was increase in poverty, and lack of food and supplies”<sup>5</sup>. It was a sad scenario for the missionaries, but at the same time it was a fertile ground to preach the Good News and practice the joy of serving others.

Samuel Silva Gotay explains,

Eight months after the arrival of the missionaries, the leaders of the boards of the Presbyterian Church, American Baptist Church, Congregational Church, and Methodist Episcopal Church, reunited to make an agreement about geographical limits for evangelism. They also included the leaders of the Disciples of Christ Church, the United Brothers Church, the Christian, and Missionary Alliance Church, the Lutheran Church, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Joaquín Vargas, *Los Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico. Albores, Crecimiento y Madurez de un Peregrinar de Fe, Constancia y Esperanza. 1899-1987*, (Miami: Iglesia Cristiana Discípulos de Cristo en Puerto Rico, 1988), 41-42.

<sup>5</sup> Vargas, 46.

Episcopal Church. They met in New York and decided to divide the island of Puerto Rico into 9 areas.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 1 shows the division of Puerto Rico for each denomination. Appendix 1 shows the map of Puerto Rico and the current locations of the 106 Disciples of Christ congregations.



*Figure 1: Map of Puerto Rico made by the denominations that participated in the New York meeting in 1899*

The ACMS continued to bring missionaries to Puerto Rico. Vargas states, “as a result of the hurricane, they noticed the need to create a home for orphaned children, and in 1900 they opened an orphanage for girls.”<sup>7</sup> This marked the identity of the denomination. Since their beginning in Puerto Rico, the church was motivated to work with communities, people in need, and populations at risk. The denomination was growing and people were getting baptized. Months later, the missionaries opened another orphanage, but this time for boys. These orphanages became a place for education. Not only biblical education, but also formal education.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Silva Gotay, *Protestantismo y Política en Puerto Rico 1898-1930, Hacia una Historia del Protestantismo Evangélico en Puerto Rico*, (San Juan, Puerto Rico: La Editorial Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1997), 112-113.

<sup>7</sup> Vargas, 50.

In 1910, the *Escuela Preparatoria para Pastores* or Prep School for Pastors was born. It was a school to prepare young Pastors for the mission in Puerto Rico. Vargas explains, “The firsts students of this school were the boys from the orphanage.”<sup>8</sup> Missionaries of other denominations were concerned about the theological education of new Puertorrican ministers. The Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Presbyterians, and United Brothers decided to unite efforts to establish the *Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico* (Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico). This seminary opened its doors in 1919.

According to Silva Gotay, the main goals of this institution were:

1. Create a theological institution like the ones in the United States to train missionaries.
2. House the institution close to the university of the state in order to promote academic education to the Puertorrican communities.
3. Establish the essential unity between the evangelical denominations.<sup>9</sup>

Silva Gotay continues stating that, “other evangelical denominations like the Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Baptist Church were establishing congregations in different parts of Puerto Rico. The missionaries of these denominations reunited and agreed to divide the island of Puerto Rico into sectors.”<sup>10</sup>

According to McAllister, “the C. Manley Morton were missionaries assigned to Paraguay, but in 1918 they were reassigned to Puerto Rico. They taught in the Evangelical Seminary for two decades and led in the development of the McLean

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<sup>8</sup> Vargas, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Silva Gotay, 257.

<sup>10</sup> Silva Gotay, 113.



Conference Grounds.”<sup>11</sup> This information is relevant today because theological education is part of our identity as a denomination. The Disciples of Christ have been concerned about theological education and today we see the results of these efforts, along with the development of new programs in theological education and education in general.

Education, evangelism, and service defined the Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Disciples of Christ were growing throughout the island. In 1922, there were 847 Disciples of Christ members. In 1932, the denomination grew more than a 100% and reached 1,780 members. In 1942, they reached 3,502 members; and in 1948 the membership was over 5,000 members.<sup>12</sup>

Due to the division that the missionaries agreed to in 1899, the Disciples of Christ denomination was growing in the Central and North areas of the island. Congregations were growing in the countrysides of the island and the main cities.

The year 1933 was very significant. Puerto Rico suffered an enormous economic crisis during the Great Depression. The Missionary Board of the United States decided to withdraw the North American missionaries on account of the lack of resources. Only 14 Pastors were left, and they had to tend the 31 established congregations. Puerto Rico was still struggling after the *San Felipe* hurricane that destroyed church buildings and houses throughout the island.

With little or no money, the few Puertorrican Pastors and lay leaders kept working and preaching the Gospel. The Disciples of Christ experimented with something new despite poverty, hunger, unemployment, and epidemics. The Reverend Leonardo Castro

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<sup>11</sup> McAllister, 316.

<sup>12</sup> Vargas, 77.

began a prayer circle at noon every day in his congregation. He invited everyone to participate. The first day only two persons attended the prayer meeting. During the following days, the group kept growing and it was transformed into a big explosion of revival. Every Disciples of Christ congregation experimented with this form of prayer during a Great Revival where people kept praying for hours and the Holy Spirit performed amazing miracles. During the “Revival of the year 1933” people were healed, families were saved, young people spoke in tongues, and one man who had been pronounced dead, came back to life. People received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the dark and hopeless atmosphere was transformed into hope, peace, service, and evangelism. New leaders were developed.

Vargas states that during the “Revival of the 33”, new hymns were born.<sup>13</sup>

Not with the usual organ that the North American missionaries brought. This time there was a new, authentic worship with native, and cultural instruments. A new and native identity was growing. The North American missionaries, who opposed the Revival movement, did not approve this new identity. The missionaries designed retreats at the McLean Conference Ground to “put out” the revival. This did not work out as the missionaries expected. The Puertorrican Pastors reunited and decided it was time to be an autonomous church.<sup>14</sup>

Figueroa and Del Pilar note that Puertorrican Pastors “created the *Junta Electiva de los Once*, a board of eleven Pastors selected by the members of the Convention of Disciples of Christ Delegates in Puerto Rico.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vargas, 101.

<sup>14</sup> Vargas, 104-105

<sup>15</sup> Figueroa and Del Pilar, 188.

The relationship between the Disciples of Christ in the United States and the Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico was transformed. Despite the opposition to the revival and the new organization in Puertorrican leadership, the missionaries understood the circumstances and redefined the concepts of “mission” and “missionary”. The missionary Clement M. Morton first opposed the revival, but he later recognized what the Holy Spirit was doing. He wrote a letter apologizing and accepting the revival and its effects.<sup>16</sup> This marked the transition of a church that was a mission to become an independent church with its own government and organizational structure.

During the 1940’s to the 1980’s, the Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico were growing and maturing. Although the denomination in Puerto Rico separated from the denomination in the United States, they maintained a friendly relationship and worked together in a Joint Commission. This Commission meets biannually to discuss overseas missions in Latin America.

The history of the Disciples of Christ in Puerto Rico is very unique. During the past decades, the denomination has been developing new programs in education, families, evangelism, missions, and leadership training. In 2016, the denomination has 106 congregations throughout the island of Puerto Rico, and 21,195 members.

In order to compare the Disciples of Christ denomination with the other mainline denominations in Puerto Rico, we asked their leaders about their current membership. For example, the Lutheran Church of Puerto Rico currently has 3,800 members. The Baptist Churches of Puerto Rico has 114 congregations, 10 congregations in development, and

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<sup>16</sup> Vargas, 122-125.

This letter is found on the archives of the Overseas Ministries Division in Indianapolis.

approximately 20,000 members. The Methodist Church in Puerto Rico has 103 congregations, 4 congregations in development, and approximately 12,500 members. The United Church of Christ in Puerto Rico has 76 congregations and approximately 5,000 members. The Presbyterian Church of Puerto Rico has 72 congregations and approximately 7,000 members.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico continues making history and great contributions to the island. The denominational profile in this project presents the hidden gems of our heritage and the achievements of past and present generations. This profile confronts us with the new challenges and opportunities we face as a country. With more than 100 years in the making, we will continue to make history, so this generation can also experience a new revival.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **FROM GROWING PAINS TO ENJOYMENT AND FULLNESS OF LIFE**

I remember a specific day when I was in second grade. I was playing and running with my friends on the school playground when suddenly I fell on my knees. I quickly stood up and kept on running. I did not feel anything right away. When recess was over and I sat on my chair back in the classroom, I felt a very warm sensation on my knee. When I reached down and touched my knee, both my hand and my knee were covered in blood. I was hurt. I did not feel pain when I fell on the ground but afterwards. The wound on my knee took weeks to heal and it left a permanent scar.

As human beings, we all have our emotional and spiritual scars. We face disappointment, betrayal, deception, violence, and so much more. Life experiences may break our hearts sometimes. It is sad to say that Christian people might have disappointed us in the past; but the good news is that the Bible shows us a new way of living. This new way of living involves love, trust, peace, and truth. This new way of living shows us that we are not alone, that we are part of a body. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 shows us the true meaning of fraternity, love, empathy, and community.

What does 1 Corinthians 12 have to do with church growth? If we want to grow as human beings and as a church, we need to know how to relate to one another. We need to heal our relationship with God, our relationship with ourselves, and our relationship with our neighbor.

According to Conzelmann, in his chapter on 1 Corinthians 12:

Paul speaks only on the unity, which is brought about by the abrogation of the (physical and social) differences between believers. This idea is not derivable from the figure of an organism. For the latter is designed to emphasize the belonging together of different elements. Thus the disturbance in the sequence of thought is an indication in favor of the interpretation that the body of Christ is preexistent in relation to the “parts.” Incorporation into takes place through baptism. The latter brings about the eschatological abrogation of human differences: in Christ they no longer exist—that is to say, in his body, in the church.<sup>1</sup>

If we are part of the body of Christ, we need to know our roles, boundaries, and purpose. In the same way we know our body and we learn to read its signals and changes, we need to know the body of Christ where we belong. We need to understand that the body of Christ is a community led by Christ and the Holy Spirit. This metaphor about the body teaches us about unity, diversity, service, and harmony. “This metaphor illuminates the truth about the union of the church and participation with Christ. The church is not merely a human organization: rather, it is brought into being by the activity of the Holy Spirit, which binds believers into a living union with the crucified and risen Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

The apostle Paul makes this analogy to emphasize the true meaning of community. There are no leading roles or heroes. The only main character is Christ, the

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 212.

<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 214.

head of the body. Some churches face conflict because everyone wants to be the leader or because everyone wants to do the same job. Sometimes I hear people saying that they are called to preach or sing in front of a congregation because that is the only way to be recognized. In this postmodern world we live, some millennials (and grownups) want to be famous. They want to be big stars and be recognized. Sadly, this way of thinking has been manifested in some congregations. A congregation that replaces God and worships other idols such as ego, avarice, and arrogance, will eventually die.

Orr and Walther sustain that “No one part, however, can become the whole body or indeed function in its place. The eye and the head have obvious pride of place in the body and are preeminent in directing its activities, but without the muscular strength of the hand and the feet they are relatively ineffective in action. So the principle that each person has a place in the function of the body of Christ precludes any one member assuming the role of the whole.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not a secret that if we want to grow and mature as human beings, we need to pray and let the Holy Spirit transform us and show us the appropriate way to live. If a congregation wants to grow, Christ has to be the leader. After all, He is the head of the body and the vine. “I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, it is he that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>4</sup>

In order to grow, we need to follow the direction of the head, Jesus Christ. The problem is that the other parts of the body do not necessarily agree on everything, or are

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<sup>3</sup> William F. Orr, and James Arthur Walther, *I Corinthians, A New Translation with Introduction with a Study of the Life of Paul, Notes, and Commentary*, Vol. 32 of The Anchor Bible, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 286

<sup>4</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1971), Jn 15.5.



not willing to work in unity and harmony. We focus our attention and listen to other voices besides Jesus. Sometimes we spend our time in church bickering, whining, gossiping, and hurting each other. This causes distress to the body of Christ. However, despite our human flaws, the mercy of the Lord surpasses us and He keeps calling more people to join the body.

The body of Christ is in constant change. We live a constant process in which new people are joining the system and breaking the homeostasis. This happens on a denominational level as well as at a congregational level. During this research and project, we were able to observe some growing pains in the body of Christ in the diversity, anxiety, and new covenant.

### **Diversity**

The Bible says:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.<sup>5</sup>

There is no diversity or unity when all the members of the body want to do the same thing. According to Wiersbe,

Unity without diversity would produce uniformity, and uniformity tends to produce death. Life is a balance between unity and diversity. As a human body weakens, its "systems" slow down and everything tends to become uniform. The ultimate, of course, is that the body itself turns to dust. This helps to explain why some churches (and other Christian ministries) have

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<sup>5</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1971), 1 Co. 12.14–21.

weakened and died: there was not sufficient diversity to keep unity from becoming uniformity.<sup>6</sup>

A congregation will eventually die if everyone does the same job or if one person does the job of everyone else. There can be no “over functioning” or “under functioning” in a healthy congregation. However, Roberta Gilbert explains “it is common to see on declining congregations that a clergy may inherit a group that is used to being “done for,” expecting him or her to do all the work while they sit back and watch or criticize. You might also notice some clergy who may go into a leadership under functioning and watch while other people come across as leaders while the congregation goes into a frenzy of activity that may not fit with the mission of the group.<sup>7</sup> This is not exclusively to Pastors; this can also happen to lay leaders in any congregation.

When diversity in the body of Christ is not managed appropriately, communication is ineffective, and the growing pains are even more painful than they should be. Orr and Walther express that 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 deals with communication between church members and with theological and social misunderstandings: “It concerns spiritual phenomena manifested in the church. It will at once become apparent that the perplexities are not just theological misunderstandings: there is controversy—which fits the picture of the congregation in Corinth as it has developed so far in the epistle.”<sup>8</sup> They also add:

“Confidence that the Spirit is guiding the church has prompted some persons to feel that any strong conviction, drive toward action, or

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<sup>6</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 609.

<sup>7</sup> Roberta M. Gilbert, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking About the Individual and The Group*, (Virginia: Leading Systems Press, 2013), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Orr and Walther, 277.

emotional outburst occurring in the church is authorized by the Spirit. Paul reminds them that their recent pagan life strong impulses led them to the worship of lifeless idols. This, he implies, is not irreverent to their present life as Christians in the church. The turbulent nature of human emotions, especially when connected with excited religious experiences, may lead to ideas and actions that are in conflict with the received traditions and to excessive reliance upon communal feelings.”<sup>9</sup>

The Disciples of Christ believe that the sinful life we had before meeting Christ died the day we were baptized. We were born into a new creature. We are still going to be sinners and make mistakes but we made a commitment to repentance. This compromise involves studying the Bible and letting the Holy Spirit transform us every day. However, our emotions and life events can shake our faith. It is heartwarming to know that we do not have to face our struggles alone. We are part of a body! We can feel the comfort, love, and strength from God when brother or sister in Christ hugs us and shows us solidarity. That is a wonderful gift to receive when you become part of the body of Christ.

Our differences should bring us closer, not bring us apart. Orr and Walther sustain that “Christ exists as a body, the parts of which are all the Christians. The one Spirit is related to this as the effective force, which, in the act of baptism, brings this body to experimental reality. Diversity of race and social class does not prevent incorporation into one body, but conversely the unity of the body does not eliminate the differences among the parts.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 277-288.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 285.

How do we deal with our differences and still remain a part of the body of Christ? How can a church grow despite their differences? “The effectiveness of Christ in this His body is diversified by the functions of His parts, that is the individual members.”<sup>11</sup>

Instead of arguing and acting like lone rangers, the body of Christ has to walk together in unity and harmony. After all, none of us decides where the body is moving. To overcome the growing pains of diversity, we need to follow Christ and work together as a church, doing the will of God. I agree with Orr and Walther when they say “the body is formed under the aegis of the one Spirit, which gives significance to the parts in relationship; and this is the presence of the working of Christ in, say, Corinth.”<sup>12</sup> This presence of the work of Christ is not only for Corinth; it extends to Puerto Rico too.

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety is another way of showing growing pains in a congregation. Murray Bowen developed a family systems theory based on the family as the emotional unit, not the individual, though the individual is most important to the theory.<sup>13</sup> Later on, Edwin Freidman proposed,

All clergymen and clergywomen, irrespective of faith, are simultaneously involved in three distinct families whose emotional forces interlock: the families within the congregation, our congregations, and our own. Because the emotional process in all of these systems is identical, unresolved issues in any of the, can produce symptoms in the others, and increased understanding of any one creates more effective functioning in all three.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 286

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Gilbert, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011), 1.

As Christians, we constantly have to deal with anxiety on a personal, family, and congregational level. Chronic anxiety can be infectious. If we see the church as the body of God, we do not want anything infectious that may cause damage to the whole body. Steinke explains, “Since anxiety can be infectious, the leader does not want to be its source or its transmitter.”<sup>15</sup> When the leader of a congregation is “infected” by chronic anxiety, the rest of the body will know. A person can perceive when another person is anxious. Our body language is revealing.

When a congregation or a minister is suffering from chronic anxiety, the pain is unbearable. Something has to change in order to grow and overcome the pain. How to be effective and pertinent in our communities when anxiety does not let us see and think clearly? How do we revitalize or restart a declining and anxious congregation?

Cosgrove and Hatfield maintain that people in a congregation behave like family members do. “All who participate in the life of the congregation belong to the family in some way. But is it possible for one to remain only marginally related to the family, with the result that is never clear whether one really belongs or not?”<sup>16</sup> This becomes an anxiety trigger in a congregation. The joining of a newcomer or the absence of new people joining the church can also trigger anxiety on the minister, lay leaders and the whole congregation. We cannot force people to become Christians and be part of the body of Christ. Our responsibility is to “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

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<sup>15</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove & Dennis. D. Hatfield, *Church Conflict: The Hidden Systems Behind the Fights*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994),179.

them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”<sup>17</sup> The growth of the church is not our doing. That is the result of the grace from God.

Cosgrove and Hatfield continue,

A newcomer cannot join without invitations and acceptance by the family, especially the parents. But joining itself is something the newcomer must decide to do. Churches have explicit rituals by which new members and new Pastors join their official ranks. Joining the church family is another matter. It has its own rules, but they are nowhere written down. And there are no official ceremonies that establish whether one is in or out.”<sup>18</sup>

Sometimes we act this way consciously and sometimes we follow these implicit rules unconsciously. Steinke says “when anxiety is ignored, it can hold us back, take us by the throat, and chain us like a slave.”<sup>19</sup> We need to pay attention because anxiety affects human functioning by tightening thinking or restraining behavior. According to Steinke, this is what anxiety does to repress a person:

- Decreases our capacity to learn
- Replaces curiosity with a demand for certainty
- Stiffens our position over against that of others
- Interrupts concentration
- Floods the nervous system so that we cannot hear what is said without distortion or cannot respond with clarity
- Simplifies ways of thinking (yes/no; either/or)

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<sup>17</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1971), Mt. 28.19–20.

<sup>18</sup> Cosgrove and Hatfield, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Steinke, 7-8.

- Prompts a desire for a quick fix
- Arouses feelings of helplessness or self-doubt
- Leads to an array of defensive behaviors
- Diminishes flexibility in response to the challenges of life
- Creates imaginative gridlock (not being able to think of alternatives, options, or new perspectives).<sup>20</sup>

Anxiety does all these things to a person and it can also cause it to a group of people, including a congregation. Anxiety separates the body of Christ. It is like a snowball that starts with a small problem or complains and ends us in division, lies, and fragmentation of the body of Christ. This anxiety snowball can kill a congregation.

Bowen and Freidman propose that the best way to combat anxiety is to maintain a no anxious presence. In the Bible, there are numerous instructions about being a no anxious presence:

- Be angry, but do not sin. (Eph. 4:26, RSV)
- You may not grieve as others do who have no hope. (1 Th. 4:13, RSV)
- In thinking be mature. (1 Cor. 14:20, RSV)
- Have no anxiety about anything. (Ph. 4:6, RSV)<sup>21</sup>

It is true that anxiety can be infectious. A non-anxious presence can also be infectious. This fact helps us overcome the growing pain of anxiety. No matter how anxious is the environment in the congregation may be, a single member of the body of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 35.

Christ can make a difference. “The Bible speaks about self-control. It is implied in the description of the apostle Paul of love—it is not ‘arrogant or rude’ and ‘does not insist on its way’ (1 Cor. 13:4-5). But our natural instinct is to fire back in defense to an attack.”<sup>22</sup>

Steinke explains that to be less defensive and automatically reactive to the attacks of others requires some discipline. Some non-anxious responses include:

- Being thoughtful before acting
- Staying calm and poised
- Using I statements
- Maintaining awareness of self
- Focusing on larger purposes rather than winning an argument
- Asking questions<sup>23</sup>

### **New Covenant**

The Bible says, “But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”<sup>24</sup>

My knee accident happened many years ago. However, when I look at my knee and see the scar, I remember that painful day. The body of Christ can get wounded. If my brother or sister is injured, sad, troubled, or hurt, I should feel his or her pain. If my

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>24</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1971), 1 Co 12.24–26.



brother or sister is happy, I should celebrate. No matter what we are going through in life, God gives us another chance to connect and reunite with our neighbor.

As the body of Christ, we deal with pain, but we also receive healing. This is the result of a covenant. Richard Hamm says:

In the New Testament, it is clear that the early church regarded themselves as bound to God and to one another in a covenantal relationship. Like Israel, they had been ‘made a people’ by God and have been *called* into the body of Christ; they were the *ekklesia* (a Greek word meaning “community of the called”). They experienced joy in His new covenant and celebrated it in their central act of worship, the Lord’s supper.

The covenant that is the heart of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is rooted in the same new covenant that has been the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ. It is a three-way covenant between God, us, and one another. We understand ourselves to be part of the *ekklesia*, the community of the called. We live not by a contract that emphasizes *rights*, but by a covenant that emphasizes *responsibilities*. A contractual way of life invites ‘winner take all’ strategies and the competitive hoarding of the church’s gifts. A covenantal way of life together, however, calls for interdependence, synergy, and the sharing of resources. It also calls for mutual accountability to one another before God.<sup>25</sup>

The Bible says, “...there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”<sup>26</sup> God insists on telling us we need to stay together in order to grow and mature. We need to understand the purpose of the body and our function as a member of the body. Doing this will help us go from growing pains to the enjoyment and fullness of life.

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<sup>25</sup> Richard L. Hamm, *2020 Vision for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 158-159.

<sup>26</sup> *The Revised Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1971), 1 Co 12.25–26.

It is not about being the most important or indispensable. It is about being a servant. It is learning to live in harmony with our neighbor and love one another.

I have to agree with Hamm when he explains that: “We Disciples are a people of the Table, the Communion Table. The Table, rather than a body of doctrine, is at the center of our life together, reminding us that we are part of the body of the grace of God and that we are called to live grace-fully with each other.”<sup>27</sup>

The passage of 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 influences my desire to research and create a denominational profile because every congregation is different and unique. The main purpose is not to have a *one size fits all* church. The main purpose is to have a diverse and healthy church. Every congregation can be doing something different in their communities, but they are doing what God wants them to do, despite how many members they have. This biblical approach is important because we need to see the denomination as part of a body where everybody is important and we all follow Christ, the head of the body.

We need to change the way we see the church and the way we see each other. Stevens and Collins explain, “Change in one evokes change in another. We are tied together in family and church like elements in a hanging mobile; changes in one ‘arm’ produce changes in all the others. But this gives rise to two paradoxical needs that collide and interact: the need to be *we* and the need to be *me*.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hamm, 162-163

<sup>28</sup> Paul Stevens and Phil Collins, *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), xix.

The Word of God invites us to celebrate who we are as individuals, celebrate our identity as a congregation, and celebrate our identity as a denomination. It also invites us to see each other and validate our scars, history, emotions, talents and gifts. Being a member of the body of Christ means being willing to respond to covenant with God and serve with our gifts, not as a competition, but as a body.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE PROCESS TO DEVELOP A DENOMINATIONAL PROFILE**

I believe that in order to have a vision, you need to look at what you have in your hands and what surrounds you. If a church wants to grow, it ought to examine its mission and vision and also define its identity. It is hard for a human being to achieve his or her dreams when the person does not know her or his identity. It is imperative to know us in order to achieve our dreams and goals. If a denomination wants to grow, it needs to know its strengths and weaknesses in order to be relevant to the current reality as well as the future one. If a church does not appraise what is doing, it will get stuck, will decline, and will eventually die.

The Disciples of Christ Church in Puerto Rico does not want to stagnate or die in the future. This motivated the denomination to create a full time position for an Associate Minister in Church Growth and Family. I was called by the denomination to work in this ministry setting since August 2015. During this time, I was beginning my project prospectus and was given the opportunity to develop a project that would benefit the entire denomination.

The first part of this project began with the project prospectus research. I conducted some bibliographic research in search of resources and previous investigations. I found out that there is plenty of literature about congregational church growth, however there are very few books and resources about denominational church growth. Nevertheless, I was able to identify some resources that were helpful during the design of the project prospectus and implementation.

Once the project prospectus was approved, I chose a Lay Advisory Committee of eight persons:

- Dr. Eliezer Álvarez, Associate Pastor in Christian Education, Director of the Biblical Institute *Juan Figueroa Umpierre* and Financial Consultant.
- Dr. Carmen J. Landrón, Retired Pastor and Professor
- Dr. José Longo, Geography Professor
- Rev. Gerardo Morales, Pastor
- Rev. Eugenio Torre, Pastor and Engineer
- Ms. Margarita Ortiz, Engineer
- Ms. Jessica Cruz, Public Relations Professional, Founder of *Ing3nio Communications*

- Mr. Javier Delbrey, Advertising, Marketing, and Business Development

The members of the Lay Advisory Committee were very involved and passionate during this process. The group developed a strong bond and there was a nice spark in the group chemistry. To my surprise, after the project phase ended, the group kept a commitment with the denominational Church Growth ministry and continued working together on new projects.

### **STEP 1: Explain the Project and Introduce the Lay Advisory Committee**

I called a meeting with the Lay Advisory Committee on December 10, 2015. After an opening prayer, I explained the purpose of the meeting and the project prospectus. I listened to their ideas as they developed. It was an amazing experience to hear their points of view. The group atmosphere was very dynamic and respectful of the variety of opinions. From the beginning, they were passionate about finding ways to revitalize local congregations and the denomination as well. When we finished the brainstorming, we set a date for our next meeting.

### **STEP 2: Analysis and Selection of the Congregations**

The second meeting took place on January 21, 2016. Following the opening prayer and revision of the statement of the process to create a denominational profile, the Lay Advisory Committee took into consideration the following documents:

- a. Church growth reports from 2001-2015. We used tables and graphics to analyze the church growth of the 106 Disciples of Christ congregations in Puerto Rico.

- b. Yearly Financial Reports of the 106 Disciples of Christ congregations in Puerto Rico (2001-2015)
- c. Census 2000 and 2010
- d. Census Demographic and Housing Estimates 2010-2014
- e. Map of Puerto Rico with the localization of every Disciples of Christ congregation

We analyzed all the information and every member of the Lay Advisory Committee selected 20 congregations that caught their attention. The Lay Advisory Committee clarified the concepts of “growing congregation”, “declining congregation” and “stable congregation.” We defined a stable congregation as a congregation that has been able to maintain 5% more or less of their total membership. A growing congregation was defined as a congregation that has grown more than a 5% of its membership. A declining congregation was defined as a congregation that has decreased more than a 5% of its membership.

The Lay Advisory Committee was given a reasonable time to read and analyze all the information. Each member of the committee selected 20 congregations and we discussed our opinions. We considered variables like congregations without pastors, demography, geographical locations, and specific church conflicts. Although we had information from 2001, we focused our analysis only in the past 5 years (2011-2015).

The Lay Advisory Committee decided to select two growing congregations, two declining congregations and two stable congregations. We conducted a geographical analysis in order to select each congregation. We wanted to analyze the possibility of various congregations in the same geographical area having differences in their growth.

How come a growing congregation is just a couple of minutes away from a dying congregation? What are they doing to stay alive? What are they not doing to stay alive? Is it possible that people are moving from one church to another? What are the reasons for leaving or joining a congregation?

In order to maintain the confidentiality of these congregations and their Pastors, we are not going to use their real names. We will refer to them as:

- Growing Congregation #1 (GC1)
- Growing Congregation #2 (GC2)
- Declining Congregation #1 (DC1)
- Declining Congregation #2 (DC2)
- Stable Congregation #1 (SC1)
- Stable Congregation #2 (SC2)

The next chapter presents additional information about each of these congregations and the specific reasons they were selected. After we selected the six congregations, we determined the steps to follow.

### **STEP 3: Interviews with Pastors of the Selected Congregations**

The Lay Advisory Committee decided that the next step of the process would be to conduct an interview with the Pastors of the selected congregations. It was decided that the criteria of selection were going to remain confidential for the purpose of this project was not to aimed to discourage Pastors by stating the fact that their congregation was declining. We want to encourage Pastors and lay leaders and provide with practical tools to revitalize their congregation, no matter if they were growing, declining, or stable.

We formed small teams to conduct these interviews. I contacted the six Pastors and sent them a letter (Appendix 2) explaining the project. They were very responsive and willing to accept the interview. The Lay Advisory Committee established a due date for the interviews as well as another meeting date to discuss the results. We also set a date for a focus group meeting with two lay leaders of each congregation. This process is explained in Step 4.

The Lay Advisory Committee established guideline questions for the interviews with the Pastors of the selected congregations. We asked them:

- Starting date in the congregation.
- How did you find the congregation in terms of:
  - Location (accessibility)?
  - Physical structure (buildings)?
  - Organization?
  - Relationships between church members?
  - Spiritually and worship?
- What were the first changes you had to make?
- How did you put together a vision plan?
- How did the congregation participate in this process?
- What is the vision of the congregation now? What are their future plans?

After the questions were established, a letter of the agreement was sent to the members of the committee (see Appendix 3). This letter was a reminder of the meeting agreements and the questions guidelines. We sent a reminder with the following information:



- Communicate with your partner to coordinate the date for the interview. Every interview should be done in the church facilities of the congregation (place of worship).
- Take a picture of the congregation and identify the exact geographic coordinates for the Global Positioning System (GPS).<sup>29</sup>
- Ask the Pastor for his or her consent to record the interview.
- After the interview is over, remind the Pastor to choose two lay leaders who would participate in the focus group, as explained in the letter. One of them must have been a member of the congregation for at least 10 years. The other person must be a leader of Evangelism, Christian Education, or other ministry.

The Lay Advisory Committee was divided into small teams to do the interviews. They all recorded the interviews, took pictures of the congregations, and identified the coordinates for the GPS location.

I teamed with another member of the Lay Advisory Committee and interviewed the Pastors of the two declining congregations. The next chapter will explain what happened in those interviews.

#### **STEP 4: Focus Group with Lay leaders of the Selected Congregations**

The Pastors of the selected congregations appointed two lay leaders to participate in the focus group. The Lay Advisory Committee established specific requirements for the participants. One of the requirements was membership in the congregation for at least 10

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<sup>29</sup> The exact coordinates were not necessary in terms of the scope of this project. However, we are planning to include this information in the denominational directory so it would be easier to locate every congregation on a GPS. This will be very helpful to specific congregations that are far from the metropolitan area of Puerto Rico and congregations with hard to find locations and accessibility.

years. It was necessary to have leaders who knew the history of his or her congregation or at least part of it. We also wanted the second appointed leader to be an active member and actively involved in church projects. We needed to receive their input of their local congregations and the denomination.

The participants were oriented before the meeting began. Unlike the interview with the Pastors, this interview was not individual. It was a group interview. It took place in the denomination headquarters on January 25, 2015.

I explained to the participants the purpose of the focus group and asked for their consent to record the meeting. Every participant gave his or her oral and written consent for the recording of the interview (Appendix 4). They signed an attendance sheet and were given a nametag before the meeting began. They were welcomed with snacks provided by the denomination.

One of the members of the Lay Advisory Committee, along with me, asked the questions to the participants. The denomination paid for a professional to record the interview. He also created a closed circuit room where the rest of the Lay Advisory Committee was able to watch and listen to the interview from another room in the same building. This was very helpful and an eye opener experience. Body language was also very revealing. We will explain these details on Chapter 5.

#### **STEP 5: Compare and Contrast the Opinion of the Pastors, and the Lay Leaders**

The Lay Advisory Committee met on March 3, 2016, a week after the focus group meeting. We discussed the results of the interviews with Pastors and the opinion of the lay leaders. The committee agreed to have a meeting to discuss both sides after the focus group interview. We did not want to create stigmas or preconceptions of the

congregations based only on the opinion of the Pastor. We wanted to hear the voices of the lay leaders. We wanted to consider their perception. Do they see the same thing their Pastor sees? Do they see something different in the congregation?

The impressions of the Lay Advisory Committee are discussed in Chapter 5.

### **STEP 6: Define the Denominational Profile**

The Lay Advisory Committee had a meeting to organize the collected information. We established categories to describe the denomination and the perception of Pastors and lay leaders:

- History
- Geography
- Membership and Finances
- Organizational Structure
- Strengths
- Opportunities
- Current challenges
- Reasons for members leaving a congregation
- Reasons for members staying in a congregation
- Suggested efforts to compensate for the decrease of the church membership
- Expectations of the Pastor
- Expectations of the lay leader
- Recommendations for the denomination
- Recommendations for the local congregations

The complete Denominational Profile will be presented on Chapter 7.

**STEP 7: Evaluation, Conclusions, and New Opportunities for the Denomination**

The Lay Advisory Committee captured a snapshot of the denomination and analyzed the complete denominational profile. We organized this information so it would become available to the denominational leaders and local congregations. We highlighted the recommendations for the local congregations and the denomination. The committee was so committed to the Church Growth Ministry that they decided to continue to meet in order to develop new projects based on this research.

The Lay Advisory Committee evaluated the process and the performance of the Doctor of Ministry student. This will be explained in Chapter 8.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE SELECTED CONGREGATIONS**

As introduced in the previous chapter, the Lay Advisory Committee selected six Disciples of Christ congregations: two growing congregations, two declining congregations, and two stable congregations. This chapter shows the results of the interviews with the Pastors of the selected congregations. In order to maintain the confidentiality, we are not going to use their real names. We will refer to them as:

- Growing Congregation #1 (GC1)
- Growing Congregation #2 (GC2)
- Declining Congregation #1 (DC1)
- Declining Congregation #2 (DC2)
- Stable Congregation #1 (SC1)
- Stable Congregation #2 (SC2)

Figure 2 shows the financial report of these congregations during 2015. The Lay Advisory Committee analyzed this information and compared it with the membership of each congregation in order to calculate the per capita income.

**Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico**  
**Financial Summary of Selected Congregations**  
**2014-2015**

Iglesias	<i>Recursos Disponibles y Desembolsos del Periodo</i>								
	Tithes, and		Total	Additional Income			Total of Additional Income	Yearly Total Income	Disburse- ments
	Regular Offerings	Other Offerings		Subsidies	Loans	Other			
Growing Congregation #1	789,751	147,749	937,500	0	0	43,141	43,141	980,641	993,498
Growing Congregation #2	587,147	54,241	641,388	0	200,000	7,015	207,015	848,403	961,676
Declining Congregation #1	127,548	37,180	164,728	0	0	0	0	164,728	161,260
Declining Congregation #2	404,570	29,763	434,333	0	0	2,140,376	2,140,376	2,574,709	622,367
Stable Congregation #1	388,733	14,230	402,963	0	0	0	0	402,963	423,216
Stable Congregation #2	257,799	41,390	299,189	0	0	1,590	1,590	300,779	297,227

Figure 2

The GC1, DC1, and SC1 are located in the municipality of Bayamón, where the first Disciples of Christ congregation was born. The GC2, DC2, and SC2 are located in the municipality of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico. Here are some facts of these congregations.

### Growing Congregation #1 (GC1)

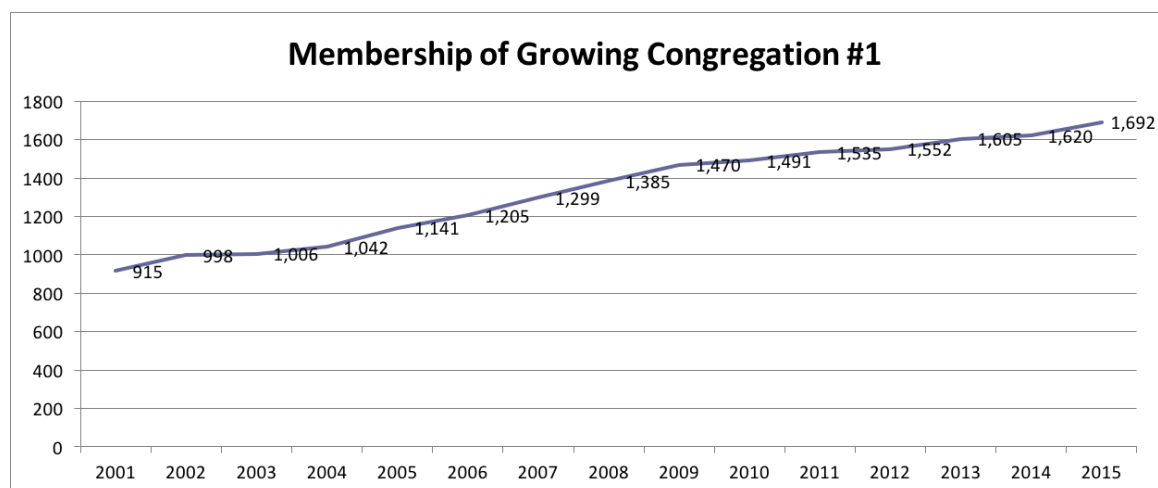


Figure 3

The GC1 was established 97 years ago. It is the largest congregation of the denomination. As shown on Figure 3, they currently have 1,692 church members. They have a Senior Pastor and a female Associate Pastor. The fact that this congregation has a

female Associate Pastor is important to emphasize the uniqueness of women in ministry in the denomination. The actual Senior Pastor began his term on December 2015. The former Senior Pastor spent 20 years in the position before being called to another position within the denomination. The Associate Pastor has in the position for 16 years and is currently working with the newly elected Senior Pastor.

GC1 has been showing constant growth since 2001. It is located in one of the main roads in the city of Bayamón. They have a big, and comfortable sanctuary to worship. They also have additional buildings for Sunday School and community services. These buildings have an estimated value of \$3,000,000. They offer two Sunday services. The first begins at 8:30 AM and the second begins at 11:00 AM. They offer Sunday School in between both services at 10:00 AM.

GC1 was the first congregation in Puerto Rico to broadcast a live Sunday service online and to broadcast Bible studies during the week. They have programs for the community and the sanctuary is open seven days a week for prayer or community services. Their budget reveals that they prioritize evangelism programs, Christian Education programs, and leadership training (See Figure 2.) Almost five years ago, they developed an Inner Healing Program for the whole congregation, as well as Bible study guides for youth and adults. Every new member is required to participate in an Inner Healing Program for six months prior to the regular Bible study groups. The Pastoral Staff and lay leaders of this congregation affirm that this program is one of their biggest strengths. It is helpful for unchurched people, as well as for church people who are transferring from other denominations.

When a small team of the Lay Advisory Committee interviewed the Pastoral Staff, they shared their experience in this congregation. The leaders, and Pastoral Staff were concerned about church growth since they began their appointment in the congregation. They had a vision. They wanted the church to grow. They began their journey analyzing the community and listening to their needs. They went to government agencies and asked about upcoming projects in the community. More than 20 years ago, the congregation knew that private construction companies were going to be building nine housing developments around the church. Government agencies showed them the building permits so the church leaders became aware that their community was going to change. Their location was going to be a very busy spot on a main highway. They realized that they had to be prepared for the thousands of families that were going to be living in those housing projects. The Senior Pastor said this to the leaders 20 years ago:

We are going to receive thousands of families in the community. Let us suppose that half of them are already Christians and go to a church. There is a possibility that half of those Christian families will be looking for a new place to worship closer to their new home. These are people that you do not have to evangelize because they are already Christians. We just have to let them know that we are here! They can join us, and we can include them in our effort to preach to the other half of unchurched new residents.<sup>1</sup>

This congregation was motivated. They had a vision and they knew they had to be prepared for the new changes in their community. As time went by, a large group of the families that moved to this community became members of this congregation.

GC1 is very active in their programs and community services. For example, every Wednesday they load up three buses with elderly people and lay leaders to visit the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rev. Miguel A. Morales, General Minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico, and former Senior Pastor of GC1.



community and praying for the people. They also help families who are experiencing financial trouble, unemployment, illness, and family crisis. If they find a struggling family who needs medicine for one of their member who is ill, or a family without groceries, they provide them food from the food pantry that the church keeps. They do not sell anything. On the contrary, they freely give and God continues to provide for their holistic needs.

A very interesting thing that describes GC1 is the relationship among the various generations. In this congregation it is very common to find a group of Millennials praying or playing with a group of Baby Boomers. Every generation participates in its own services. They try to keep a balance between the postmodern and the conservative. This means that they are willing to find new and creative ways to preach the Gospel, without compromising the Word of God and the essence of the Gospel. The message is still the same: “*Cristo sana, salva y transforma.*”<sup>2</sup> The only thing that changes is our way of communicating this wonderful Gospel to make it pertinent in our present context.

GC1 works hard towards excellence. They are constantly pushing themselves to keep serving with excellence. The Pastoral Staff is constantly reminding people of the mission and vision of the church. Everyone in the congregation has the same will to serve, and use their gifts to do the will of God. Their vision consists in being a happy church. They use the word “*feliz*” or happy as a synonym for “blessed.” They aspire to be a blessed and happy church, based on the Beatitudes of the Sermon of the Mount.

The fact that GC1 has a clear vision statement has made possible the spreading of this enthusiasm that delivers an implicit message that despite the problems, God is

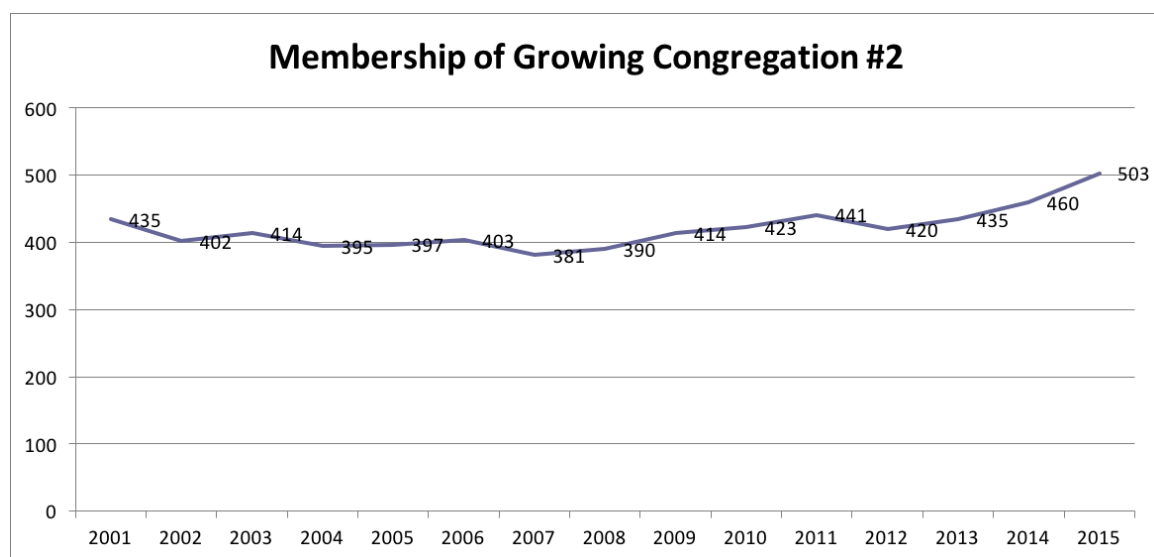
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<sup>2</sup> Christ heals, saves, and transforms.

willing to bless us and we need to show our gratitude by following the testimony of Jesus.

### **Growing Congregation #2 (GC2)**

Growing Congregation 2 is located in San Juan, Puerto Rico. It was established 34 years ago. The Pastoral Staff includes a Senior Pastor and an Associate Pastor. The Senior Pastor has on the position for almost 10 years while the Associate Pastor has been in the position for 7 years. They are located on a busy highway of San Juan. Figure 4 shows their membership during the past 15 years, currently reaching 503 church members.



*Figure 4*

GC2 celebrates two services on Sunday morning. Some say that pain is inevitable when you are growing. This congregation has suffered growing pains that were transformed into big opportunities. It has been struggling with insufficient parking space for the last couple of years.

During the project phase, I was invited to participate in one of its Sunday worship service. I attended the second service. The Senior Pastor invited my family and myself to the annual new church members meeting.

GC2 has been creating a systematic process in order to provide pastoral care to all people. It has been a process in preparation for the expected growth. Once a year they celebrate the Baptism and New Members Bible School class for prospective new members and people who visit the congregation but are not official members yet.

The Pastoral Staff and lay leaders invited all of these people to a special Sunday luncheon after the second service. I was invited to the event and was able to witness the experience of this gathering. After the opening prayer, every participant received a folder with the agenda and information about the Baptism and New Members Bible School class. They also provided a fill out form to gather information about their family composition and specific needs. The Pastoral Staff introduced themselves and so did the lay leaders of the Church Board. They served lunch as they sat around large tables. The Senior Pastor presented a brief summary of the history of the congregation explaining the responsibilities of the congregation and its vision and introducing the purpose of the Baptism and New Members Bible School class. People were invited to participate in this class given that they had been consistently attending Sunday services for the last couple of months. The Senior Pastor allotted some time to answer questions from the guests. A total of 30 people attended this event and introduced them while sharing the reasons for staying in the congregation. This part of the meeting took more than an hour for everyone was so happy expressing the things they love the most about this congregation.

The reasons to stay expressed by the participants included the following:

- They recently moved and wanted a church closer to their new home.
- They can no longer drive and wanted a church at a closer distance to their home.
- A friend or relative is a member of the church and invited them. They liked the congregation and decided to stay.
- A teen boy expressed that he loves the church because he has more friends at church than in school.
- The church has a great location, close to their homes and workplaces.
- They were greeted with love since the first visit. People are very friendly and loving.
- They find peace.
- They love the structure and church organization.
- The church offers excellent programs for children and youth groups. A woman said that her motivation for staying in GC2 is the way they treat her child and teach him the Bible.

All of the participants in that meeting were very happy with GC2. They loved the location of the church for. It is very accessible and easy to find. However, they expressed a major complaint in the lack of parking space. This is not a surprise for the Pastoral Staff and Church Board. They know they have been struggling with lack of parking. That is why they offer two Sunday services and bought a big piece of land, enough to resolve the parking issue and build new dreams.

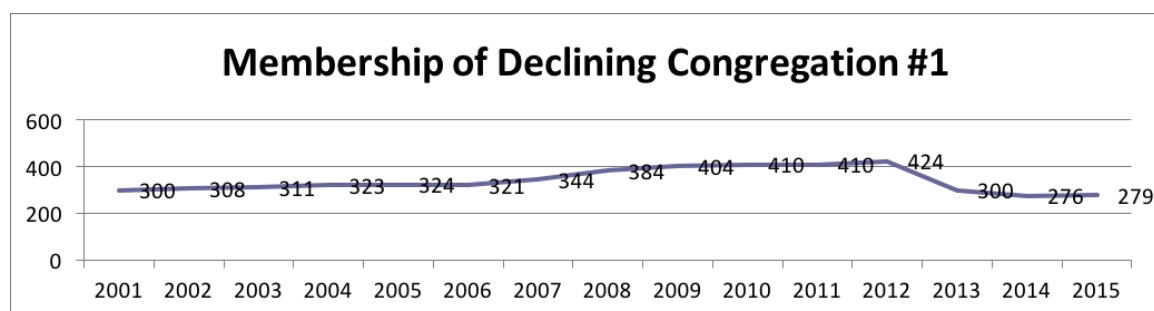
GC2 has structured a system for Pastoral care. Once a person becomes a member of the church, his or her name is referred to the Elders. They are in charge of calling them

to follow up. New members are also referred to a specific interest group (children, youth, couples, elderly). These interest groups meet at least once a month. The lay leaders have come to the understanding that this is a wonderful way for people to get to know each other. They provide activities for each interest group so everyone can feel welcome and make friends at church.

They have developed a Strategic Plan for 2016-2020. This plan is their guide to fulfill their vision as a church and keep growing in their community. They included the achievements of their past Strategic Plan for 2011-2015. GC2 is very organized and structured. The Senior Pastor believes that a structured church will attract structured people so they pay special attention to the details. This congregation has structured plans to keep maturing and do the will of God.

### **Declining Congregation #1 (DC1)**

Declining Congregation #1 is located in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, about 15 minutes away from GC1 and SC1. This congregation was established 55 years ago. The current Pastor has been in the position since January 2000. In 2003, a new sanctuary was inaugurated right next to the old one. Although this new sanctuary can sit 600 people, the parking area can only accommodate 100 cars. Figure 5 shows the numbers of current membership of 279. Most of these members are 55 years old or older.



*Figure 5*

DC1 is located on one of the main roads in Bayamón. I am no stranger to this community. This is where I grew up. This community has changed during the last ten years. The profile of this community is mostly elderly Puertorrican and young families from the Dominican Republic. More than 20 churches surround this congregation. In less than a mile radius, you can find plenty of Pentecostal Churches, a Catholic Church, a Methodist Church, and an Episcopal Church. One of the Pentecostal Churches was established less than 20 years ago and has a membership of 600 approximately. The profile of this church is mostly Dominicans who live in the community.

This is an important fact because it describes what happening in this community. When my parents were growing up in this community 40 years ago, it was filled with Baby Boomers. The schools were not enough in this community. Nowadays, the schools in this community are closing because there are much less students in Elementary, Middle, and High School.

*Table 1 Population of Bayamón, PR<sup>3</sup>*

<b>Information</b>	<b>Census 2000</b>	<b>Census 2010</b>
<b>Population</b>	224,044	208,116
<b>Population Density</b>	5,142 m <sup>2</sup>	4,777 m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Population 18 years old or younger</b>	30.1%	22.6%

<sup>3</sup> Oficina del Contralor, *Municipio de Bayamón: Indicadores Socioeconómicos*, (Bayamón, Puerto Rico: Municipio de Bayamón, 2016).

<b>Population between 18 and 65 years</b>	61.0%	60.9%
<b>Population 65 years or older</b>	8.9%	16.5%

Table 1 shows the population in Bayamón, in the areas where GC1, DC1, and SC1 are located. As the Census reveals, there has been a decline in the population in this town. The Pastor of the DC1 expressed how the former Pastor began a project for the elderly. The former Pastor had a vision and believed that the community population was going to change, so he developed a project for the elderly called “*Huellas*” (Footprints). This ministry is directed to the elderly of the congregation. It is a fellowship project where their members meet to get-together, talk, pray, play board games, do physical activities, and road trips to cultural sites. It is important to say that 80% of this congregation is 55 years old and older. The Pastor says that this sector of the church is very committed and involved. They are very faithful with their tithes and offerings.

DC1 has one red flag: only 20% of the congregation is younger than 55. It is inevitable to ask ourselves whether this congregation will have a future after 80% of the congregation dies. DC1 is very functional and proactive around older people, but young people and couples with children do not find this congregation appealing. The Pastor and the leaders are aware of that but have not modified their programs or created new ministries to tend those needs. In the interview, the Pastor kept repeating an expression in Spanish: “*El Pastor anterior me dejó la chiringa volando.*” The translation of this expression is similar to that when in English someone says “If ain’t broken, don’t fix it.”

The Pastor used this expression, which would be translated as “The former Pastor left me a kite already flying,” because he believed that the former Pastor had done an amazing job and there was no need to change anything. He believed that, as long people keep tithing and offering, the church will continue to grow.

During the last 3 years, DC1 has lost 145 members. They have a big sanctuary with the capacity to sit 600 people yet they have not even tried to identify their needs, limitations, and obstacles to grow. Their vision is stuck in the past. DC1 is in its comfort zone and has not been able to read the signs and red flags around. It continues to follow the same structure and programming from 40 years ago. For example, on Sunday mornings they offer Sunday School while their worship service takes place on Sunday evenings. The majority of the congregations in Bayamón have Sunday School and worship service on Sunday mornings. Twenty years ago it was very common to have evening Sunday services, but due to social and economic changes and also due to safety concerns, people favored the morning service and stopped attending evening services.

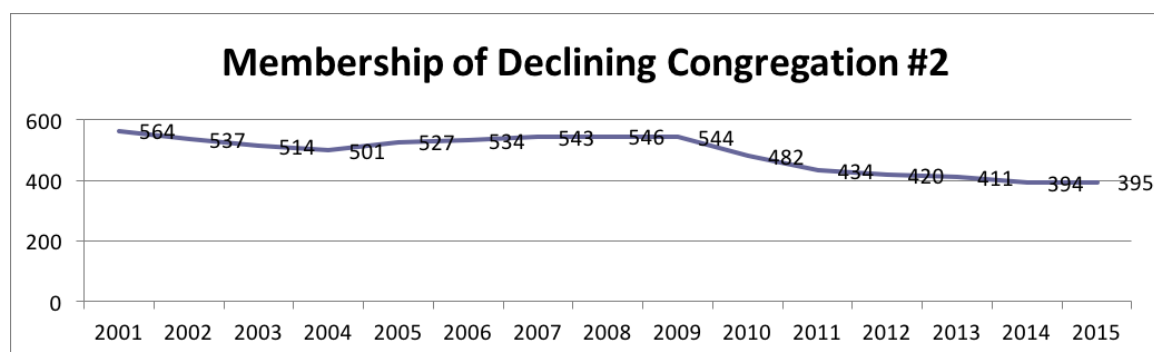
DC1 keeps working in the community. However, it needs to take a closer look to the new reality of the community and the program and structure of the church. It is good to celebrate the history of a congregation and highlight the contributions of former Pastors, but the church needs to re-examine and evaluate everything they do to determine its relevance and effectiveness.

### **Declining Congregation #2 (DC2)**

DC2 was established in 1975. It is located on a very important and busy road in San Juan. The church building is 3 stories tall and 14,000 square feet in total. According to the Pastor, this congregation has a great team of hardworking and committed lay



leaders. Figure 6 shows that in 2008, membership total was 546. The current membership total is 395.



*Figure 6*

During that peak of large membership, DC2 celebrated two Sunday worship services in the mornings and had an Assistant Pastor. In the present time, only one worship service is celebrated on Sunday mornings and a new Assistant Pastor for the Youth was recently hired. The Assistant Pastor coordinates an evening service for the youth group once a month.

DC2 knows how to dream big. Years ago the Pastor and the congregation had a vision. They wanted to build a new sanctuary and build a nursing home. The research showed that the surrounding community was going to change. There are several main hospitals, schools, universities, and urban settings nearby so the leaders wanted to be prepared for the new changes in the community and they knew that their facilities were not going to be enough to receive the new people that would join the community.

DC2 bought a significant piece of land, located in front of a small train station. The purchase happened before the train station was even built. The vision called for the facilities to be more accessible and have a bigger parking lot for the lack of parking space is a big obstacle for church growth. The purchase of this large piece of land responded to the desire of developing a long term plan that included building a retirement facility,

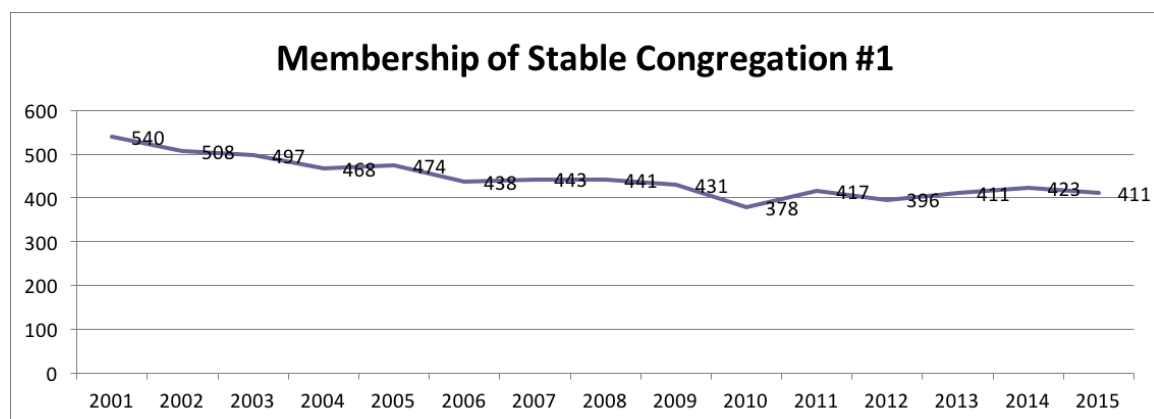
building a new sanctuary with the capacity to sit 800 people, and a second retirement facility.

The first part was accomplished with the construction of a retirement facility 10 stories up with 120 apartments that was inaugurated in 2012. DC2 continued to work on the rest of the master plan for church growth, but membership was decreasing. The Pastor acknowledges that more than 60 people have moved to the United States, most of them professionals who moved searching better work opportunities. The Pastor expressed how migration has touched this congregation very hard because the majority of the people who moved to the United States were great leaders in the congregation. This situation leaves DC2 with empty spaces in leadership. These empty spaces take time to fill. It takes time to train new people. Maturity takes time. DC2 is aware of this so it continues to work on discipleship and community service by renovating their children and youth program, and offering free citizenship classes to Dominicans, Colombians, and other Latin Americans who live in the community.

The Pastor of DC2 will retire in a few of months. He feels that the congregation needs encouragement and new strengths to focus on the current vision that appeals to the recent changes in the community and the congregation. This congregation has a great potential. While goodbye to their Pastor of 22 years, there are also new opportunities knocking. There is the opportunity for a complete revitalization. DC2 has accomplished amazing things that no other church has done before starting with owning an amazing piece of land amidst the urban setting in the capital of Puerto Rico. Despite the decline in membership, this congregation can transform its turning point into something bigger than ever imagined.

### Stable Congregation #1 (SC1)

SC1 was established 38 years ago. The current Pastor has been in the position for 3 1/2 years. The church is located in a residential area and is not visible from the nearby main road. The current membership is 411. Figure 7 shows the membership since 2001 and the stable tendency during the last 5 years. However, this table shows that this congregation had the capacity to receive more than 500 members. Although we only considered the last 5 years for the selection of the congregations, it is important to highlight this fact.



*Figure 7*

SC1 only has a Pastor without a Pastoral Staff. Nevertheless, there is an Administrator in charge of managing the church facilities and property, which is an important position. Other congregations do not have an administrator or a Pastoral staff. Most congregations only have a Senior Pastor.

During the interview with the Pastor, he was concerned because in the last 10 years, SC1 has lost more than 450 members. Most of them were leaders, musicians, and Sunday School teachers. He recognized that one factor for this loss is the Bylaws. This congregation has established in their Bylaws some numerous rules and requirements for participating or serving in a ministry. People needed to have experience and follow strict

rules to be able to participate or serve in a ministry. This caused the exile of leaders and newcomers that do not have a place to serve in the body of Christ.

According to the Pastor, SC1 is devoted in prayer and the study of the Bible. They believe a promise God made them: the latter glory will be greater than the first. This Pastor and the congregation began a new project of revitalization:

- They began restructuring the Bylaws to allow more people to serve and participate in church ministries. (Even though the denomination has a set of Bylaws, every local congregation can have their own Bylaws to help them shape ministry in their own community contexts. The Bylaws of the local congregations need to be in line with the denomination guidelines.)
- Since the Pastor is also a musician, he reorganized the church choir and acts as the musical director. This is helping the congregation to go back to its roots and history, which began with a strong musical influence.
- The Pastor designated an Assistant to work with the youth group.
- They are strengthening their Sunday School programs.
- They began a new evangelism program to reach out to the community.

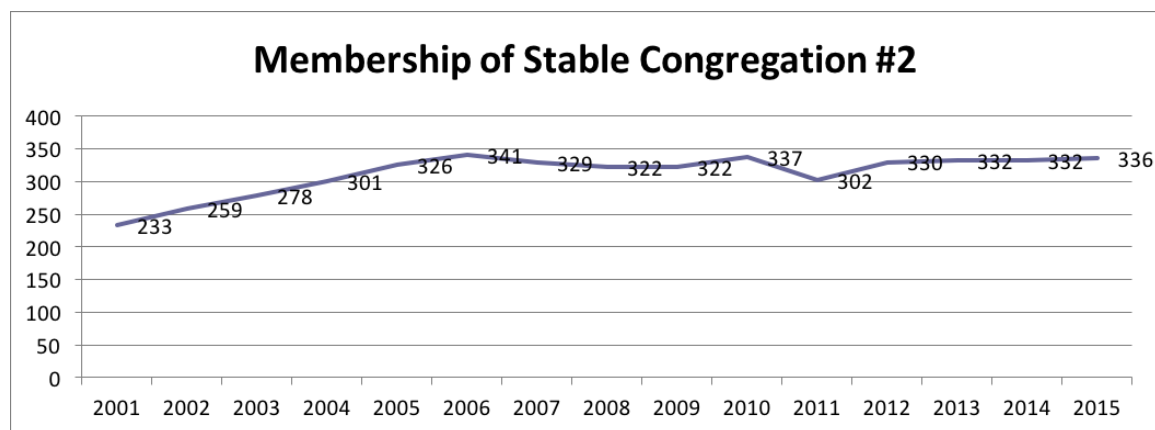
A congregation needs to deal with inside issues before reaching out to the community. This Pastor believes this statement. That is why he began working within the congregation before developing new reach out programs for the community. This is part of their vision as a congregation. Their current vision is to educate the congregation and outreach in their community. They also plan to expand their mission and outreach to other communities in Puerto Rico and overseas.

### Stable Congregation #2 (SC2)

SC2 was established 58 years ago. This congregation is located in San Juan, Puerto Rico, very close to a main highway, universities, and hospitals. They have a Middle School in front of their building. GC2, DC2, and SC2 are 10-15 minutes away from each other.

SC2 has a female Pastor since 2001. It had an Associate Pastor for a couple of years but she moved to the United States to pursue a doctoral degree. There is an Administrator in charge of the management of the building and church property.

The current membership is 336 as shown on Figure 8. It has been stable for the last several years. The Pastor of this congregation expressed how migration has influenced them. In recent years, the congregation has lost about 20 families who moved to the United States. SC2 is aware of the fact that more people will continue to move to the United States yet that has not stopped them from continuing the work.



*Figure 8*

SC2 is a very structured church. It is very open and newcomers may participate in church ministries. It has developed strategic plans with short and long-term vision. It is currently working on a vision plan for the next 10 years.

SC2 had problems with lack of parking space. Newcomers would drive by and leave because there was no available parking. This problem has been recently resolved through an agreement with the school in front of the church that allows them the use of their parking space on Sunday mornings. In return, the church provides the school classrooms for conferences and special events.

SC2 has a different leadership structure. They have adapted the Natural Church Development Program of Christian A. Swartz. This program claims that there are universal principles in every congregation. These are:

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-based ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Effective structures
- Inspiring worship service
- Holistic small groups
- Need oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships<sup>4</sup>

These universal principles are their guide for organization and church structure. They proclaim to be an inclusive congregation where everyone is welcome to develop their faith and be part of a service project. SC2 is currently developing a community profile to identify the needs of the community and strengthening its community programs

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<sup>4</sup> Icdcug.org. Accessed July 10, 2016. <http://icdcug.org/nosotros/dni/>.

to tend people with addictions and the homeless. Evangelism is seen as community service.

These six congregations have similarities as well as differences. They are in similar contexts yet different communities. All of them are developing projects in their unique way. The question is: How can we establish a denominational profile if every congregation is unique and every community are different? How can we find harmony and identify common needs and resources for the whole denomination?

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THE VOICES OF THE LAY LEADERS**

The interviews with the Pastors of the selected congregations were very significant in this process. The Lay Advisory Committee established the importance of a focus group that included lay leaders of these congregations but without their Pastors. Before this focus group meeting, the Lay Advisory Committee designed some key questions. We made arrangements the entire interview to be recorded.

This focus group meeting took place on a Thursday night. The Lay Advisory Committee had previously requested from the Pastors of the selected congregations for the appointment of two lay leaders. One of them must have more a member of the congregation for over 10 years while the second leader ought to be a person in leadership of a ministry. We sent them a letter explaining the project and the reason for their selection. We also sent a reminder letter before the meeting.

The leaders were greeted with coffee and snacks. They each had a nametag and were given a consent form to sign (see Appendix 4.) The meeting began with a prayer and an explanation of the purpose of the meeting. Once again, I asked for their consent to record the interview before the taping began.



One of the Lay Advisory Committee members and I were leading the questions. The rest of the members of the Lay Advisory Committee were watching the interview from another room on closed circuit transmission.

We asked the leaders to introduce themselves to break the ice. The interviewers were able to listen carefully for the reason for this meeting was to listen, not to debate.

The questions used to steer this conversation were:

1. How do you perceive the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico?
2. What are their strengths?
3. What are their areas of opportunity?
4. What challenges is the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico facing today as a denomination?
5. What challenges are local congregations dealing with?
6. What are the reasons people leave a congregation? Why some people come to church and decide to stay?
7. During recent years, Puerto Rico has been dealing with a migration issue. This has affected our local congregations for entire families are moving to the United States. How has this migration issue affected your local congregation?
8. What changes have you made to compensate the decrease in membership? What kinds of projects have been effective in your congregation?
9. Does your congregation have an organized structure of work? How do they function in the following areas?
  - a. Worship and program
  - b. Evangelism

- c. How to encourage people to stay in the congregation
  - d. Church growth
  - e. Building and grounds
  - f. Talents and gifts
10. Does your congregation have short term or long term plans?
  11. What is the role of the Pastor of the local congregation?
  12. What is the role of lay leaders in the local congregation?
  13. Does the congregation have a vision regarding church growth? If so, what is the vision?
  14. How can the denomination help a local congregation to grow?
  15. How does your congregation relate to the denomination? Do you attend denominational events during the year? Do you go attend meetings and Annual Conventions?
  16. Do people in your congregation identify with the denomination?
  17. Are you aware of the Vision 2020 project that the denomination is working on this year?
  18. What do you think about this kind of dialogue between the denomination and lay leaders?
  19. From 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest score, how do you define and rate this meeting?

This interview was an eye opener. The body language was very important and revealing. The Lay Advisory Committee did not want to have the Pastors and lay leaders present in the same interview. We wanted to find out about their perceptions in separate

meetings. We did not interview Pastors and lay leaders together because we thought that if Pastors were present in the same meeting, lay leaders could omit important facts and opinions thinking they might hurt their Pastors. The Lay Advisory Committee expected openness and honesty, and fortunately it was achieved.

The lay leaders were very open, honest and passionate about the things they love most in their congregations. They also recognized the things that needed improvement as a denomination and local congregations. Most of them admitted that they feel connected to their congregation but not to the denomination. They all expressed their support and connection to the denomination, but they felt more pride regarding their local congregation than their denomination. Only half of these congregations were engaged on a denominational project called “2020 Vision,” a project designed for church growth that consists of specific guidelines for the congregations so they could identify their needs and community profile. The expected result of this denominational project is for every congregation to develop a strategic plan for the next five years. The idea is to encourage the development of a new vision for the church as a tool to revitalize the congregations. Although this “2020 Vision” project is not part of this research, we have been working with it and encouraging congregations to take part in the process because it is an excellent way to determine where we are and where we are going in the future.

The members of the Lay Advisory Committee received their expressions, comments, feelings, and perceptions from the participants of these interviews. We analyzed their stories and established different categories as to define the denominational profile of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico presented in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **DENOMINATIONAL PROFILE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) IN PUERTO RICO**

This denominational profile is the result of a self-evaluation process that will serve as a guide to develop new strategies, tools, and recommendations to strengthen the congregations. Although Puerto Rico is facing a social, economic, political, and spiritual crisis, the denomination is determined to grow and experience a revival. This profile is intended to help Pastors and lay leaders to evaluate their duties, purpose, structure, strengths, and opportunities.

#### **I. History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

1. Established in Puerto Rico since 1899.
2. Has 106 local congregations located in 34 of the 78 municipalities of Puerto Rico.
3. Has 4 missions (congregations in development or planted church) in Puerto Rico.

4. Has been able to maintain ecumenical relationships with other religious institutions (Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, Council of Churches of Puerto Rico, Bible Society)
5. Since its beginning, it has developed social projects seeking the benefit of populations at risk, such as an orphanage for boys. As a historical fact, it turned out that some of those boys became ministers and contributed to the well being of the church in Puerto Rico.
6. In 1977, the Biblical Institute “Juan Figueroa Umpierre” (IBJFU) was born as an educational project to train lay Pastors and lay leaders as to accomplish the mission of God. This institute offers three diplomas: Christian Education, Theological Studies, and Family Accompaniment. The Biblical Institute is currently in the final steps in order to receive the certification of the Association for Hispanic Theological Schools (AETH). Between 1980 and 2015, a total of 498 students have graduated from IBJFU.
7. It began as a mission of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in United States but grew into an autonomous church. Although independent from the church in the United States, it maintains healthy boundaries, good communication, and respect with the church. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in United States, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico formed a Joint Commission, which meets biannually to carry out conversations about about missions and joint projects outside Puerto Rico and the United States.

8. It became a missionary church, establishing missions in Latin America (Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay, Argentina, Nicaragua and Dominican Republic)

## **II. Geography of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

1. Most of the local congregations are located in the Metropolitan and Central (mountain) areas of Puerto Rico (Bayamón, Guaynabo, Naranjito, Corozal, Dorado, Ciales.)
2. There are a number of local congregations that are located outside Metropolitan or Central area (Aguadilla, Ponce, Luquillo, Fajardo, Humacao, Maunabo, Cabo Rojo.) Their geographical distance from the majority of the congregations makes it difficult for them to relate with other congregations and often makes them feel isolated.
3. The main headquarters are located in the town of Bayamón.
4. “Campamento Morton,” the church camp facility, is located in Barranquitas. This is a place for retreats and weekend meetings created in order to provide a space for lay training and development.
5. The congregation and the denomination jointly own all properties and buildings facilities of every congregation. The denomination holds an inventory of the properties and their real state value.

## **III. Membership and Finances**

1. Membership (2015): 21,195
2. Children under 12 years old: 2,663
3. Growth rate (2014-2015): 1.93 %

4. Financial income (2015): \$18,751,805
5. Expenditures (2015): \$16,715,568

#### **IV. Organizational Structure**

1. The main headquarters, “Centro Cristiano,” offers services to the local congregations, lay leaders and Pastors. They have available rooms for meetings and conferences. The facilities include meeting rooms. The Biblical Institute offices and facilities are also housed in this building. The “Centro Cristiano” staff includes four secretaries, two accountants, one administrative assistant, and associates Pastors for Stewardship, Christian Education, and Church Growth and Family. The Associate Pastor in Christian Education also serves as Director of the Biblical Institute.
2. The Annual Convention is celebrated every year and includes representation from every congregation as well as every Pastor, active or retired, is part of the assembly.
3. The Representative Board meets quarterly. One delegate of each local congregation and the entire Pastoral body are members of this Board.
4. The denomination has a Cabinet formed by the presidents of each committee and working commission. The Cabinet meets once a month to discuss administrative aspects and projects of the denomination.
5. The denomination has a Pastoral body of 169 ministers (60 women and 109 men.) Most of the Pastors hold a Master in Divinity degree. The distribution of the Pastoral body is as follows:
  - Ordained ministers in local congregations: 73

- Retired ministers: 45
  - Ordained ministers in Specialized Ministries: 15
  - Lay ministers: 5
  - Ministers without a local congregation or in transition: 8
6. The denomination has a General Minister. According to the Constitution and Bylaws of the denomination, the General Minister: “Is an ordained minister, elected by the Annual Convention. This person is the general administrator of the church. As administrator, the General Minister works with the church leaders, committees, commissions, Pastoral body, and lay leaders to accomplish the mission of the church.
  7. The denomination has a congregational government. According to the Constitution and Bylaws of the denomination, the congregational government is characterized for its freedom of thought and action when the church is reunited in assembly or when every local congregation is reunited. Majority will make all decisions within the local congregations. The decisions made by every congregation constitute us as one body when they are made in harmony, responsibility, and respect.
  8. The denomination has a Biblical Institute. This institute offers three diplomas: Christian Education, Theological Studies and Family Accompaniment. Is currently in the final step to receive the certification of the Association of Hispanic Theological Schools (AETH.) Offers trimestral courses. This trimester they have 111 students.



9. The denomination interest groups are called “Confraternidades” or Fellowships. These groups are: Youth, Women, and Elderly. Each group has a board that coordinates events and projects where the local congregations can relate and participate.
10. The denomination has 16 social projects that serve orphaned or abused boys, retirement facilities for the elderly, and counseling centers. They also support other institutions with programs that help people in drug rehabilitation and families of hospitalized children.
11. The denomination has 7 private schools from Preschool to High School.
12. The denomination is represented in ecumenical institutions like the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico and the Council of Churches of Puerto Rico.
13. The denomination has a Constitution and Bylaws and an Informative Guide of Administrative Process of the church.

## **V. Strengths**

1. It is a church of balance, structure and transparency.
2. It is organized and stable. It has earned the respect of other religious institutions in Puerto Rico, including the Catholic Church, the Pentecostal Church, and academic institutions.
3. The denomination has a strong program of Christian Education. They produce educational curriculums for children, youth, and adults (Revista El Discípulo, SOY un Discípulo de Cristo.)

4. Every year, books and articles about current issues and prophetic leadership in Puerto Rico are published.
5. They coordinate summer conferences and camps for teenagers and youth groups.
6. The denomination has a prophetic voice about current social and economic issues in Puerto Rico. It has a clear position on issues like abortion, marriage, family, economy, and public health.
7. The voice of the church is clear and congruent with its testimony. The church has good standing and credibility in Puerto Rico.
8. The denomination emphasizes the importance of the to lay leadership. Lay leaders can participate in leadership roles and can preside commissions and committees, including the Cabinet and the Representative Board.
9. The denomination offers high quality conferences and workshops to enhance and develop leaders. It offers specialized workshops for Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, married couples, and premarital retreats.
10. The unity of the church. This is one church that convenes in 106 different locations around Puerto Rico. The church's slogan reflects this emphasis on love and unity: "In essentials, unity; in non- essentials, tolerance; in all things, love."
11. The congregational government is perceived as strength.
12. The majority of local congregations have optimal facilities and well-maintained buildings.

## **VI. Opportunities: Areas that Can be Improved**

1. Local congregations are not totally aware of the needs within their community needs. They do not always know the specific issues and composition of the community.
2. The lack of knowledge about demographics and changes in population.
3. The absence of practical tools to conduct community census and gather information about the composition of the community.
4. Create more social projects that benefit vulnerable populations.
5. Unchurched people and people from other denominations perceive the denomination as an elite. This is due to the fact that the majority of the Pastoral body is well.
6. Some local congregations do not interact with each other. They do not know each other (especially the ones that are distant from the metropolitan area.)
7. The lack of information about the existence of regional leaders that offer support to local congregations.
8. Lay leaders do not know other Pastors besides their own. They do not know the composition of the Pastoral body of the denomination. They do not often see other Disciples of Christ ministers preaching in their local congregations.
9. The lack of follow up for first time visitors and evangelism strategies.
10. The lack of attendance of lay leaders to the Sunday School and weeknight services.

11. Local congregations lack of strategic plans to keep the people from leaving and for church growth.

## **VII. Current Challenges**

1. Some lay leaders feel uncomfortable when new people join the church. This breaks the homeostasis of the system.
2. Lay leaders have trouble understanding the meaning of growing pains. Growing implies sacrifice and not everyone is willing to sacrifice.
3. Space limitations in the facilities of local congregations. A significant number of local congregations are struggling with insufficient parking space. This causes a problem for church growth because if a person sees a full parking lot, he or she will leave and maybe go to another church with a more convenient parking area.
4. Some local congregations are losing contact with the denomination and do not attend to events aimed to the whole denomination.
5. People feel connected and identified with their local congregation but not with the denomination.
6. Local congregations without plans, projects, or vision are stuck. They will start decreasing and eventually die.
7. Promote the integration of new members and make space for them to relate with other church members and community.
8. Promote the integration of every generation (children, youth, women, men, couples, and elderly.)

9. Complicated lifestyles with multiple responsibilities (work, sport teams, studies) and family demands make it harder for people to attend weekday services and meetings.
10. Unresolved conflicts between leaders may cause lack of support of the programs and projects of the church.
11. Some lay leaders believe that their role is to watch the Pastor and other people work. They affirm that their role is to follow the Pastor and attend the Sunday service.

#### **VIII. Reasons for Members Leaving a Congregation**

1. Lack of opportunity to serve and work. Sometimes there is resistance from the existing leaders or the Bylaws that has rules that establish that new members have to wait a couple of years before being able to serve or do something at church or the community.
2. People go to other churches that provide better youth and children programs.
3. People move from one town to another or to another country. Some people and entire families are leaving Puerto Rico to live in the United States. This has been a main factor for most of our congregations. The profiles of the persons who are moving to the United States are young professionals (engineers, teachers, nurses, doctors), and couples with young children.
4. Unresolved conflicts with other people from church.
5. Sickness or trouble driving long distances, especially at night.
6. Lack of understanding of the role of the Pastor.

7. Lack of parking space available.
8. Lack or disorganization of interest groups or poor organization.
9. Discouragement given the lack of support to events and weekday services.
10. Divorce or death
11. Some people tend to go “church hopping” and “church shopping.” They visit many churches until they find one that fulfills their needs. They turn this into a pattern where they repeat this process every time their congregation do or says something they do not like or makes them feel uncomfortable.

#### **IX. Reasons for Staying in a Congregation**

1. People find a space to serve and openness.
2. The program of the congregation is attractive and well balanced.
3. The Pastor is accessible and promotes communication. The Pastor is available to visit your family and provides counseling when necessary.
4. People feel identified with the theology of the church and congregational government. This includes the proclamation of the open table.
5. People like the sermons. They like how the ministers are well prepared to deliver a great sermon with content and passion. Their sermons are educational, theological, and practical.
6. They were well received and people showed love and affection from their first time visit.
7. They have good and effective evangelism and mission programs inside and outside of Puerto Rico.

8. The congregation has excellent music.
9. They feel part of a big family.
10. They like the structure, balance, and transparency of the church in their administrative aspects.
11. They received follow up by phone call, email, or mail after their first visit to the congregation
12. They feel joy and peace.
13. They have friends in the congregation.
14. The congregation is close to their home.
15. The sanctuary is comfortable and clean.
16. People from every age can participate during the services and church programs.

**X. Suggested Efforts to Compensate for the Decrease of Church Membership**

1. Evangelism plans
2. Change in the Sunday service program
3. Love demonstration with hospitality
4. Openness of the Pastor to offer Pastoral care to everyone
5. Evangelism in the community
6. Lay leaders workshops and conferences
7. Building improvements and more spacious parking lots
8. Specific groups to provide follow up to first time visitors and new members.

9. Reinforcement of interest groups programs such as youth, couples, and the elderly.

#### **XI. Expectations of the Pastor**

1. Presence and accompaniment in times of celebration, death, and crisis.
2. To be the person who leads the congregation to articulate a clear vision and gives direction to the lay leaders and the congregation.
3. To be the leader who creates ideas and also supports ideas from the lay leaders.
4. A committed person who demonstrates a devoted life of prayer.

#### **XII. Expectations of the Lay Leader**

1. Participation in all processes and projects of the church.
2. An engaged person who demonstrates a life of prayer.
3. Contributes, shares, and supports ideas that benefit the congregation.
4. Supports the vision and ideas of the Pastor.
5. Has the will and desire to work and be engaged in church projects.
6. Supports and attends weekday services and church programming.
7. Has good communication with other leaders as well as appropriate attitudes during conflicts.
8. Maturity in the understanding of growing pains.

#### **XIII. Recommendations for the Denomination**

1. Provide the congregations with a resources pool, evangelism ideas, and new projects suggestions. Such resources should be listed on their website.



2. Identify struggling and dying congregations and provide a strategic plan in which the stronger congregations offer help and new resources to those in need.
3. Frequent conversations between the General Minister and local congregations.
4. Provide tools to teach broadcasting through the Internet.
5. Publish a directory of the Pastoral body to help lay leaders to get to know them and other Disciples of Christ congregations.
6. Compile a directory of professionals who are members of our congregations such as physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, engineers, architects, lawyers, etc.
7. Identify accessible locations for church planting.

#### **XIV. Recommendations for the Local Congregations**

1. Open the sanctuary every morning for prayer.
2. Develop community programs for deaf or hard of hearing people. Include the use of sign language during services.
3. Create and develop bilingual or English language services.
4. Send a postcard, email or make a phone call to first time visitors.
5. Invite frequent visitors to have a dialogue with the Pastor. The lay leaders and Pastor may plan a Sunday brunch with these persons as an opportunity for them to get to know the church and for the Pastor and lay leaders to get to know the community and people who visit the church.

6. Research through the appropriate government agencies about present and future community development plans, new housing buildings, businesses, schools, and other projects that will affect the community. This is very helpful when the church is compiling a long-term strategic plan.
7. Research demographic changes in the community.
8. Develop evangelism programs that include visits to the community neighbors. Find out what their needs are and show them how the church can help the surrounding community.
9. Develop social programs for the community such as health clinics, citizenship classes for immigrants, afterschool programs, and counseling.
10. Support other missions inside and outside Puerto Rico.
11. Have Pastoral teams to tend to specific ministry areas such as children, youth, couples, and elderly, among others.
12. Offer two Sunday services opportunities to accommodate more people and make a more efficient use of the facilities.
13. Offer youth services at least once a month.
14. Create a webpage and keep updates of activities and church programs.  
Broadcast live services online.
15. Involve retired ministers in committees and ministries of the congregation.
16. Promote the participation of people of every age, children, youth, adults, elderly, in the Sunday and weekday services.
17. Visit the elderly and those who are ill from the community that cannot attend church. Keep in touch with their caregivers.

18. Maintain a balance between the postmodern and conservative tradition.
19. Create and revise a church directory that includes names, phone numbers, address, email, date of birth, and family members information to help people stay in touch with them.

## CHAPTER 8

### EVALUATION OF THE PROCESS

The church needs to constantly evaluate everything the church does. An objective evaluation can be a guide us to better strategies and it helps the church be more pertinent to the surrounding reality and context. Savage and Presnell say,

At Drew, since 1998, the student is expected to employ a lay-Advisory team whose job is to inform, advise, and participate in the project. Likewise, the ministerial context (faith community) of the student is not simply the data field for study, but is expected to participate in the project. In other words, students are not simply doing critical reflection, but are engaged in ministry. The communication of reflections is not the goal of the paper. Mentoring, modeling, or motivating similar ministry changes and challenges in other ministry settings, not just to “professional colleagues” is the desired result of one’s work.<sup>1</sup>

The research method for this project was the qualitative method. According to Savage and Presnell: “Ethnographic Research Method—Using this method, the researcher becomes a ‘participant observer,’ joining the faith community as a kenotic, or empty, listener... We maintain an unbiased, kenotic position in order to understand the culture of the faith community... The researcher’s personal reflections in the form of journals,

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 26-27.

process notes, field notes, and verbatim accounts of relationship encounters are valuable data for ethnographic study of ministry sites.”<sup>2</sup> Although we used quantitative information for selecting the congregations, the Lay Advisory Committee was more focused on a qualitative method. We used interviews and focus groups to gather information and sustain our analysis.

This has proven to be a practical and useful project for the denomination. The creation of a denominational profile served as an evaluation tool. The evaluation part of any process is unlikely to be the favorite part of any task so we had to be very careful when we presenting the project because the Lay Advisory Committee believed that some Pastors would not agree to participate. There was a possibility that some Pastors would think that this project was developed to assess and judge their ministry. We were very clear about the reasons behind it and the solely goal of creating a process that would allow us to identify our strengths and areas of opportunity.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico has the desire to be relevant and effective. In order to do so, we need to know our constituents. Hudson sustains,

If the church in the 21st century wants to remain faithful, or even to survive, it must take a long, hard look at how we might bring the good news of Jesus Christ to a hurting, unstable, unpredictable, and often hostile world. We must identify new criteria for success, and perhaps even for faithfulness, and hold ourselves accountable to them, rather than measuring our effectiveness by criteria that were important in an earlier era of the world and church life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>3</sup> Jill M. Hudson, *When Better Isn't Enough: Evaluation Tools for the 21st-Century Church*, (Kindle Edition: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 5.

The voice of the Pastors and lay leaders were crucial for putting together a denominational profile. This process involved more listening than talking. We had to listen to the stories people had to share and how the church is significant to them. Savage and Presnell teach us about the importance of observation in this postmodern context. They affirm: “Scientific theory is, in the postmodern context, really just a story and observations are story-laden to begin with. There is no objective matching to reality, to the way things ‘really are.’”<sup>4</sup>

It is a process of discernment, instead of a process of measurement. Savage and Presnell continue: “Hence, instead of measuring, we need to discern. We look for the elegant story that simplifies understanding and incorporates difference and diversity. Instead of identifying pathologies we seek to discern the directions of harmony and function. We seek to uncover ‘realness’ and ‘rightness.’”<sup>5</sup>

It is much easier to find evaluation methods for local congregations, but not for denominations. However, Hudson argues “many denominations have created elaborated processes which, although helpful in congregations with the time and talent to execute them, can appear so complex that they discourage some churches from pursuing them further.”<sup>6</sup> The process we established intended to develop a denominational profile to serve as an evaluation system for any denomination. It is a fact that people constantly evaluate the work of the church. Some do it with respect and in the right forums; others

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<sup>4</sup> Savage and Presnell, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup> Jill M. Hudson, *Evaluating Ministry: Principles and Processes for Clergy and Congregations* (Kindle Edition: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 620-625.

do it on the halls or parking lots. If people in our congregations make random evaluations, why we cannot evaluate what we do and create new strategies and projects?

Hudson continues,

Evaluation will happen— in parking lots, over the telephone, in sincere and earnest conversations. To provide an orderly and caring process by which evaluation can occur gives integrity to the church's desire to be faithful to its call and mission. Faith and covenant are the foundation for ministry evaluation. Faith that trusts in the Holy Spirit to guide and direct our deliberations, faith in the inherent goodness of each as well as the potential for failure, faith that God's forgiveness is extended to us all when we fall short of God's intent for our ministry. Covenant in that we are bound to one another through Christ and called to partnership in mission. All love requires accountability. God loves us but calls us into account for the covenant we have made with God.<sup>7</sup>

If the church wants to be effective and faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it needs to keep changing constantly and allow the Holy Spirit to be the guide. When a church or a denomination conducts an evaluation, it does not necessarily mean that there is something wrong. It means there is a need to know how to do things better. The church needs to seek excellence. There should be no mediocrity in church. I agree with Hudson when he argues that the goal of an evaluation or review process should always be to improve the ministry of a congregation and the effectiveness of its members and staff.<sup>8</sup>

The implicit questions in this project were: Are we being effective in our congregations and communities? Are we doing what God wants us to do? Sometimes Pastors come up with great ideas, but that is not necessarily what God called them to do in that place. We want to strive to have better worship services in our congregations, not because we want a good "show" to entertain people, but because we believe God

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 95-101.

<sup>8</sup> Hudson, *When Better Isn't Enough*, 25.

deserves the best! God deserves excellence in everything we do! We want to be pertinent when attending the needs of the community and the congregation. If we keep doing the same thing without evaluating it, we will not grow and neither our churches. Evaluation is not about the numbers. It is not about which congregation is bigger or “more powerful.” Evaluation has to do with our vision, excellence, and discernment of the will of God.

The implicit evaluation of the denomination through this project was very revealing and helpful. This project had an amazing outcome of new projects and programs for the Disciples of Christ congregations. The expected outcome before we began this project was to create a process to develop a denominational profile that would serve as a template for other denominations, so they could be able to implement strategies and practical tools that could strengthen their church and help achieve their optimal level of growth in their communities. Furthermore, we expected to create a denominational snapshot of the six selected churches to serve as the template for creating the denominational profile for the 106 congregations at a later date.

In our analysis, we accomplished our goal, but we also obtained unexpected and additional data. For example, in the design of the denominational profile, after the analysis of the interviews and focus group, the Lay Advisory Committee identified good practices and bad practices of each congregation. This information is useful to other congregations. The human being can learn from other past mistakes and can also try new things that have worked in other scenarios. Maybe not all the strategies will work in all of our 106 congregations, but they can try them and modify them according to their reality, context, and resources.



The Lay Advisory Committee established two sections in the denominational profile for recommendations for the denomination and recommendations for the local congregations. As a result, we provided a list of strategies, tools, ideas, projects, and resources that congregations can implement. These recommendations are included in the denominational profile because we already know they were effective in the congregations we selected.

The recommendations for the denomination were quickly addressed. For example, one issue we frequently found was the need to strengthen the bond between the congregations and the denomination. The other emerging issue was the lack of resources that contribute to church growth. As a result, the denomination developed a smartphone application to track attendance and other helpful resources. This application will track attendance to all church services, attendance to the Sunday School, and the total amount of offerings and tithes. One person of each congregation will be in charge of summing this information through the app. This information will be sent to the denomination. Each congregation can access their information and see their own graphs and statistics. A congregation does not have to wait a year to figure out that they are changing. They can constantly monitor their growth pattern using this application.

Another unexpected outcome was the excellent working relationship between the Lay Advisory Committee members. They all have shown their commitment to the church growth project of the denomination and have offered to continue to meet as a committee, and work with the recommendations that were submitted to the denomination. After the project ended, they have continued meeting with me to further this project, even though the project had come to an end and was approved by the Project Advisory Professor.

The Lay Advisory Committee conducted an evaluation of this project (See Appendix 5.) The evaluation considered the following criteria:

- The objectives were clear from the beginning.
- The objectives were accomplished.
- The subject of the investigation is pertinent.
- The steps of the process were effective to create the denominational profile.
- Participation and integration of the DMin student during the process.
- Participation and integration of the Lay Advisory Committee in the process.
- Integration of the Biblical and Theological Approach.
- The information and data that was used during the process was adequate and sufficient in the decision making process.
- Participation and integration of the Pastor of the selected congregations for the process.
- Participation and integration of lay leaders to the process.

The Lay Advisory Committee stated that they strongly agree in all of these criteria statements, except on the integration of a Biblical and Theological approach. Almost half of them strongly agreed, and the other half somehow agreed to this statement. They expressed we did not talk enough about the Biblical and Theological approach during the process and they are absolutely right. We were more focused and consumed by the process, the steps, and the description of the congregations that we neglected the Biblical and Theological approach. This is something that should be taken

into consideration if another denomination wants to follow this process or if we do it again.

This process should be repeated every 5 or 10 years. This is an excellent way to discern and define what should we be doing as a denomination and as a local congregation. We constantly need to examine and celebrate our history. We need to constantly remind ourselves of our strengths, flaws, and areas of opportunity. We need to be aware of our context and cultural changes. We need to be up to date regarding the new technologies and ways to communicate the Gospel through it. We need to know our resources and what God has given us. We need to discern our gifts and talents. We need to serve and make disciples, following the Word of God. We need to pray and let the Holy Spirit guide His church. We need to have sensibility and empathy for our neighbor. We need to live as the body of Christ, and do what God wants us to do.



## **CHAPTER 9**

### **A NEW VISION FOR THE CHURCH: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The establishment of a process to create a denominational profile has been a blessing. It has opened our eyes to new horizons and possibilities. In the beginning, I thought we were going to find some resistance and opposition to the project because some Pastors could think we were going to judge their ministry by their membership number.

This project has reaffirmed that church growth it is not necessarily about numbers. Church growth is about vitality, strength, prayer, discernment of the will of God, and working together in harmony and peace. We are always going to find bumps on the road to growth, but as long as we have a vision and we keep doing what God wants us to do, we will overcome any obstacle.

We did find some obstacles for church growth. After completing this process, we found out that there are four main aspects that can help a church grow and revitalize. These are constant prayer and discernment of the will of God, vision and integration of the community, new challenges and changes, and a revival despite migration. We will proceed to discuss each aspect.

## **1. Constant Prayer and Discernment of the Will of God**

We have already established that we are part of the body of Christ. He is the head of the body and we follow His lead. When a person wants to be the star or the “hero” in a congregation, that person betrays the whole body of Christ. When this happens in a congregation, all the work is guided by human perception and human will alone. The church is supposed to be guided by the Holy Spirit, not by us. The message we preach is not something made up. We preach the Word of God and we testify what God has done in our lives through His Word and the Holy Spirit.

When a congregation stops praying, it will eventually die. Social clubs, sports teams, and political parties are different kinds of groups. Human beings lead it. A church is guided the Holy Spirit. The Pastor and lay leaders have the task of to facilitating and discern the will of God. That is why prayer is so essential in the life of a church.

The Pastor has to be committed and in constant communion with God. He or she has to understand that our role as ministers is to discern. The minister is not going to do all the work. The minister is not the star. The protagonist is the work of God in the community by means of the church.

## **2. Vision and Integration of the Community**

A church without a vision will eventually die. If a church is busy with many activities, but no intimacy with God, it will eventually die. Some congregations are so busy with programs addressed to church members that they neglect the community. Some leaders say they are too busy to pray! Some leaders do not know their community. How can a congregation be effective in their community if they do not know them? How can a congregation develop programs and ministries exclusively to church members? Is this

what we are called to do? Is the church a new social club to please us and our own selected group of friends? Are we fulfilling what God wants us to do?

When we try to do things our way and not the way of God, we fail. A congregation can plan a “perfect” activity or ministry or project, but if that is not nor what God wants to do, it will be as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. We have to be focused on the vision from God’ for the church and the community. After all, God called us to accomplish His plan. We should work with joy and serve with our talents. We need to learn how to work together in harmony as the body of Christ.

### **3. New Challenges and Changes**

The big obstacle for church growth is thinking there is nothing to change. When we believe everything is perfect and great, we need to refocus and start a new process of discernment. Discernment is something we need to do constantly. However if we are in a comfort zone, the church will lose its vitality and purpose.

The church is in constant change. If a congregation is continuously growing and reaches its peak point, it urgency needs to revise everything to determine their next step. We cannot stay in a comfort zone and believe we just have keep being whom we are. We have to renew ourselves every day. The church has to renew itself each and every day. The Bible says in Romans 12:2 (RSV): “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We need to examine our performance at church. Are we too comfortable sitting on a pew every Sunday without doing anything else? Are we too busy to do something to

serve the community? A growing church is constantly serving the community. A growing church is involved in the community and knows who they are and their needs.

We need to fight the temptation of believing there is nothing else to do. We need to fight the temptation of believing “let someone else do it.” As ministers, we cannot conform to a past vision. We need to search for a new vision and new possibilities around us. If we want to grow but we keep doing the same thing, then nothing is going to change. We need to change in order to grow. We need to step out of our comfort zones and begin new horizons. We need to control our fears and insecurities. We need to put our eyes in God, watch out for our neighbor, and observe what we have in our hands.

#### **4. Revival Despite Migration**

The fourth obstacle for church growth is migration. As we stated in the first chapter, Puerto Rico is going through a very difficult time. The numbers of families moving to other countries, especially the United States, are constantly increasing. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico has suffered the loss of many church members who moved overseas searching for new possibilities and better work opportunities.

The history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico has shown that nothing is impossible for the Lord. Even in times of poverty, we can be blessed. God never stops performing miracles.

Puerto Rico suffered a big crisis during the 1930's. People were unemployed, hungry, and desperate yet they found strength, peace, hope, and provision in the Gospel. During the Great Depression, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico was experiencing a Great Revival. God healed the ill. God provided to the needs of the



people. People were speaking in tongues and worshipping with new songs. The denomination grew in numbers as well as spiritually. New ministers were called to preach in other towns of the island. New missionaries were commissioned to other countries. Despite the crisis in Puerto Rico, the church of God was faithful and alive!

Now in 2016, we are dealing with a different kind of migration. People are still looking for hope and better opportunities. We are dealing with migration to other countries, but we are also dealing with spiritual migration. In this project we gathered information about the motives for people leaving a congregation. We discovered that a person would leave a congregation just because he or she does not feel welcome or because they could not connect to another person or group. As church leaders, we need to be aware of the reasons for leaving a congregation. What are we doing wrong that makes a visitor leave the church and never come back? What are we NOT doing that people leave and find somewhere else? If a person leaves because his or her spiritual needs were not fulfilled, we need to do something. In times of need, a revival is possible.

### **A New Vision**

This project forced us to look in the mirror. We saw our strengths, our rich history, and our resources. We also saw our flaws, our cultural context, and our possibilities. We discovered that we have many things to be thankful for as a denomination. Our hearts are filled with hope. We are praying for another revival. I believe that, this time, the revival will be different. Technology will allow us to communicate what God is already doing in Puerto Rico. Technology will be helpful so people from other parts of the world will see how we can overcome our obstacles in the name of Jesus.

This project had amazing outcomes. First, the denomination developed a mobile application that allows us to communicate with every Disciples of Christ congregation. Second, the denomination is revising its Bylaws and Constitution, to make it more relevant to the actual context and specific needs of our congregations. Third, the denomination began the creation of new programs and projects for local congregations. For example, a new Sunday School curriculum for Millennials and revitalization plans for dying and stable congregations. The denomination should not wait until a congregation is dying to offer them some help and guidance. Help and guidance should be offered to every congregation, including the stables and growing congregations. It is not wise to wait until a church is declining to do something. A denomination can do preventive work along with local congregations.

The final questions are: How are doing the will of the Lord? How do we glorify God in what we do? What are we doing to alienate people or to retain them? How sensitive are we to those who are unchurched? What are we doing to reach the unchurched inside and outside Puerto Rico? A denomination has to be pertinent and effective in everything it does. Denominations have to change and understand the culture and how people live and think. Denominations have to ask: How are being effective and pertinent in our communities and country? How do we deal with burned out leaders and Pastors? How do we develop a vision according to the Bible? This project has helped revitalize the denomination with a new vision and new projects. This is considered as a revival. Glory to God!

As a minister, this experience has been a blessing. It is a privilege to be part of the body of Christ and contribute to the mission we all have as Disciples of Christ: “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 lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”<sup>1</sup>

We need to continue our work as disciples and followers of Jesus. We need to learn to work together as part of the body of Christ and follow His lead. We need to deal with growing pains and overcome diversity and anxiety. We need to celebrate our identity as Disciples of Christ and celebrate the New Covenant as a community of the Table.

This experience has taught me what church growth really means. The purpose of this project was not to reveal a *one size fits all* recipe for church growth. It was about discernment. The only key for church growth is to discern the will of God in our congregations and communities. In order to do this, we need to pray, study the Word of God, and serve others. God will do the rest. He will help the growth. “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., Mt 28.19–20.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Hch 2.46–47.





## APPENDIX 2: Explanation Letter to the Pastors of the Six Selected Congregations

*La Iglesia Cristiana (Discipulos de Cristo)  
en Puerto Rico*



Carr. 167 Km. 19.0  
Urb. Flamingo Terrace  
Final Calle Marginal  
Bayamón, P.R. 00957-4341

Postal:  
Bayamón Gardens Station  
P.O. Box 4255  
Bayamón, P.R. 00958-1255  
Tel. 787-799-7878  
Fax 787-799-3510

[www.discipulospr.org](http://www.discipulospr.org)



**ENTIDADES**

Instituto Discipulos  
de Cristo (JFU)  
Bayamón Gardens Station  
P.O. Box 4255  
Bayamón, P.R. 00958-1255  
Tel. 787-799-7878

Campamento  
C. Manly Morton  
HC-02 Box 6395  
Barranquitas, P.R. 00794-9073  
Tel. 787-857-4195

25 de enero de 2016

Estimado Pastor:

¡La paz del Señor Jesucristo sea con usted!

Como parte de los nuevos proyectos en el área de Crecimiento de Iglesias, nos encontramos desarrollando un perfil Denominacional. El propósito del mismo es identificar fortalezas y áreas de oportunidad para brindar herramientas prácticas a todas nuestras congregaciones. Esto contribuirá al fortalecimiento y crecimiento integral de todas nuestras iglesias locales.

Su iglesia ha sido seleccionada para participar en este proceso. La colaboración necesaria consiste en dos aspectos:

1. Un diálogo con usted para conversar sobre el perfil de su comunidad e iglesia. Para esto, un miembro de nuestro comité coordinará con usted el horario más apropiado.
2. Un diálogo con dos líderes laicos que participarán de un grupo focal el jueves, 25 de febrero de 2016 a las 7:00 p.m. en el Centro Cristiano.

Agradecemos su disposición en contribuir en el desarrollo de este proyecto. Sabemos que será de bendición para nuestra iglesia y nuestro país.

Dios le bendiga abundantemente.

Fraternalmente en Cristo,

Rvda. Geritza Olivella Santana  
Pastora Asociada en Familia y  
Crecimiento de Iglesias

*En lo esencial, unidad; en lo no esencial, tolerancia; en todo amor.*

## APPENDIX 3: Explanation Letter to the Lay Advisory Committee

*La Iglesia Cristiana (Discípulos de Cristo)  
en Puerto Rico*



Carr. 167 Km. 19.0  
Urb. Flamingo Terrace  
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29 de enero de 2016

COMITÉ ASESOR TESIS DOCTORAL  
IGLESIA CRISTIANA (DISCÍPULOS DE CRISTO) EN PR

Rvda. Geritza Olivella Santana  
Pastora Asociada en Familia y Crecimiento de Iglesias

Estimados hermanos y hermanas:

¡La paz del Señor sea con ustedes!

Me comuniqué con los pastores Eugenio, Carmen Julia y Gerardo para notificarles que contactamos a los pastores de las iglesias seleccionadas. Todos aceptaron contribuir en este proceso. A los pastores de las iglesias seleccionadas les enviamos carta por correo donde les solicitamos:

- Un diálogo para conversar sobre el perfil de su comunidad e iglesia. Para esto, un miembro de nuestro Comité coordinará con ellos el horario más apropiado.
- Un diálogo con dos líderes laicos que participarán de un grupo focal el jueves, 25 de febrero de 2016 a las 7:00 p.m. en el Centro Cristiano.

De ustedes, como miembros del comité necesitamos:

1. Llamen al compañero/a del grupo para coordinar fecha de entrevista a la figura pastoral asignada. Recuerden que la fecha límite es el viernes, 19 de febrero de 2016.
2. Entrevisten a los pastores asignados en la iglesia local. Al llegar, tomen una fotografía del templo e identifiquen las coordenadas exactas de la localización del templo (GPS). Si necesitan ayuda para eso, estamos en la disposición de ayudarles.
3. Al momento de la entrevista, solicite autorización de la figura pastoral para grabar la misma. Le incluyo copia de las preguntas sugeridas que servirán de guía para la conversación.
4. Solicite los nombres y números de teléfono de los dos laicos que asistirán a la reunión de grupo focal. Uno de estos laicos debe tener de 5 a 10 años como miembro de la congregación. El otro laico debe ser líder de un comité o ministerio que esté desarrollando un programa especial este año y que la iglesia esté trabajando con prioridad.

Muchas gracias por su respaldo y compromiso. Seguimos adelante en la obra del Señor. Dios les bendiga.

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## APPENDIX 4: Consent Form for Focus Group Participants

*La Iglesia Cristiana (Discipulos de Cristo)  
en Puerto Rico*



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Tel. 787-857-4195

*Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico  
Focus Group  
Creation of a Denominational Profile*

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, an adult, consent to participate in the Focus Group of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico for the Church Growth project. The subjects of the conversation will be:

- History of the congregation and community
- Projects of the congregation

I consent to record this session, as part of the investigation process and analysis.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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## APPENDIX 5: Summary of the Evaluation of the Lay Advisory Committee

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico  
Lay Advisory Committee

**Ways to Create a Process to Develop a Denominational Profile**

March 17, 2016

**Evaluation**

Criteria	Strongly disagree					Strongly agree
	0	1	2	3	4	5
The objectives were clear from the beginning.						100%
The objectives were accomplished.						100%
The subject and theme of the investigation is pertinent.						100%
The steps of the process were effective to create the denominational profile.						100%
Participation and integration of the Dmin student to the process.						100%
Participation and integration of the Lay Advisory Committee to the process.						100%
Integration of a Biblical and Theological approach.					42.9%	57.1%
The information and data that was used during the process was adequate and sufficient in the decision making process.						100%
Participation and integration of the Pastors of selected congregations in the process.						100%
Participation and integration of lay leaders to the process.						100%

Please, answer the following questions:

1. Strengths of this process

- The integration of the committee with their different academic and professional backgrounds.
- Everyone contributed with his or her ideas.
- The enthusiasm of the Lay Advisory Committee.
- Every member of the committee was part of the analysis process.
- The opportunity to interview Pastors and listen to their congregation and community stories.
- The greatest strength is the clarity and purpose of the project. I recognize the leadership of Reverend Geritza Olivella.
- The Lay Advisory Committee was an excellent group.
- The supplied information for research and data analysis.
- The integration of every team member and the doctoral student.
- It was helpful to get to know the denomination and contribute to church growth.

2. Areas of opportunity

- We could recruit more focus groups and include more congregations.
- We could integrate more the theological aspect.
- We could repeat this process with other congregations.

3. If we were to repeat this process, what would you change, eliminate, or add?

- We could include congregations outside of the metropolitan area.
- The process was excellent. "If it's not broken, don't fix it."

4. Commentaries and suggestions:

- The experience was excellent.
- I liked the process. It was very interesting. The results are very helpful for the denomination.
- The denomination should continue with this project and help declining congregations.
- I feel very happy to have been part of this team.
- This is a great strategy to strength the denomination and local congregations.

## APPENDIX 6: Meeting Agendas

*La Iglesia Cristiana (Discipulos de Cristo)  
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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee**  
**December 10, 2015**  
**1:30 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Purpose of the meeting
- III. Presentation of the Doctor of Ministry project
- IV. Ideas to develop
- V. Next meeting
- VI. Closing prayer

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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee  
January 21, 2016  
2:00 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Statement of the process to create the denominational profile
  - a. Analysis of information
  - b. Selection of congregations
  - c. Next steps
- III. Next meeting
- IV. Closing prayer

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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee  
February 25, 2016  
7:00 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Interview with lay leaders in focus group
- III. Closing prayer

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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee  
March 3, 2016  
2:00 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Results of focus group and pastors' interviews
- III. Next steps
- IV. Next meeting
  - Dr. Kevin Miller's visit: May 2, 2016- 5:00 p.m.
- V. Closing prayer

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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee**

**March 17, 2016**

**2:00 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Summary of the process to create a denominational profile
- III. Analysis of the denominational profile
- IV. Evaluation of the process
- V. Next meeting
  - Dr. Kevin Miller's visit: May 2, 2016- 5:00 p.m.
- VI. Closing prayer

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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee**

**April 21, 2016**

**2:00 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Summary of the denominational profile
- III. New projects to develop
  - Membership Retention projects
  - Support to declining or dying congregations
  - Others
- IV. Next meeting
  - Dr. Kevin Miller's visit: May 2, 2016- 5:00 p.m.
- V. Closing prayer

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**Meeting Agenda**

**Lay Advisor Committee**

**May 2, 2016**

**5:00 p.m.**

- I. Prayer
- II. Dialogue with Dr. Kevin Miller and Lay Advisor Committee
- III. Dinner
- IV. Closing prayer

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## APPENDIX 7: Meeting Call Letter (Sample)

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January 11, 2016

Lay Advisor Committee  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico

Rev. Geritza Olivella  
Associate Pastor in Church Growth and Family

**Meeting Call**

Dear brothers and sisters:

May the peace of God be with you!

We would like to inform you that the next meeting of the Lay Advisor Committee will take place on January 21, 2016, at 2:00 PM, at the *Centro Cristiano*.

Please contact Aracelis Cruz to confirm your attendance.

God bless you.

*En lo esencial, unidad; en lo no esencial, tolerancia; en todo amor.*

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