

“WHO ARE MY CONGREGANTS?”
IDENTIFYING STRATEGIES FOR CHURCH GROWTH IN OUR
COMMUNITY

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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May 2017

ABSTRACT

“WHO ARE MY CONGREGANTS? IDENTIFYING STRATEGIES FOR CHURCH GROWTH IN OUR COMMUNITY

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BETHEL AME CHURCH, ARVERNE, NEW YORK

Churches within communities exist for a purpose and a reason. Over time, these goals sometimes get lost as church leadership adds ministries and certain churches experience fast growth. It is for that very reason that this project takes a microscopic look at Bethel AME, a small church of fifteen members in Arverne, New York. In the past, this church was the fastest growing church in Arverne. During the last twenty years, however, Bethel AME has gone from the fastest growing church in its community to a church with the least members.

The first intention of the project is to uncover the original thought process behind why the denomination placed the church in the community of Arverne. Bethel AME Church has a Thursday food pantry that serves over one hundred and eighty meals per week. Even though the food pantry is regarded as an essential service to the community of Arverne, the church has still not experienced growth.

The project examines the work of the food pantry and its relationship with those individuals who come weekly for the food. I argue that through evangelism to those serviced by the food pantry the church has a tremendous opportunity for present and future growth.

The project implements the methodology and strategy of Peter Drucker, an author, and expert in the field of non-profit consulting. To clarify its goals, this project

will utilize Drucker's famous question: "Who are our congregants?" The primary objective is to create a "Pantry Day" separate from the regular weekly pantry day and incorporate it into a church service of thanksgiving. The purpose of the Pantry Day is for the church and community to jointly come together in solidarity. The project suggests that the key ingredient for Bethel AME church growth is its consistent and weekly engagement with pantry patrons. Once Pantry Day is fully executed, it will become apparent to the church that its growth strategy has shifted from speaking theoretically of evangelism to becoming active in service to the community.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife who was patient and understanding in allowing me to reach my goals and implement my gifts. I am inspired by our two children whose smiles, and question of “where’s daddy?” never get old. Thank you to all my mentors via YouTube and the books I purchased of your written work. You have spoken to me through the depths of what the universe has allowed of your gifts, talents, and abilities. I am honored to have met you and dedicate this work to all of you.

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INTRODUCTION

A church that is experiencing growth is a church that is having an impact on its community. By the same degree, one can more than determine that a church whose presence seems absent within the neighborhood is a church that is experiencing a decline in membership and is quickly moving towards closing its doors. The old consensus of “once the doors are open the people will come” is no longer applicable when the choices of having a church experience are digitally available at one’s fingertip. However, it is not only the television and computer that provide people access to what happens in church. In order to survive in the communities they hope to serve, churches are also finding that they must compete with other neighborhood churches that might be larger or have more financial resources. Previously survival was limited to secular businesses and organizations facing economic changes and a market swings. Now churches are also finding themselves faced with the same challenges of their for-profit counterparts. Yet, confronted with the same problems does not mean that all is lost; it is rather an opportunity to exercise and implement new tools for growth that could elevate the ministry and provide new opportunities for mutual influence.

Bethel AME is a small church within the Arverne, Far Rockaway community in the borough of Queens, New York. Over the last twenty years, it has faced the challenge of a declining congregation, despite the fact that other neighborhood churches are experiencing growth. Over a period of ninety-six years, the church has had eleven pastors who came and served the community of Far Rockaway. Now, the remaining faithful

members of the church are senior citizens who remember the impact the church once had in the community. Due to an influx of new residents and the development of condominiums that attract a new demographic of residents, church members, leaders, and the pastor are pondering the next step in the life cycle of the church.

It is evident that the impact Bethel AME once had is gone and so is the spirit of those congregants who remain as discouragement sets in. One local online agency that studies churches and their collective impact indicated that 27 percent of homes in the Arverne-Far Rockaway community are likely to have “no faith involvement” as compared to the U.S national average of 35 percent.¹ The average is unusually high due to a community that is largely divided between Caucasians and Blacks and another demographic of people moving from other parts of the United States. The immediate community of Arverne surrounding the church has a dense population of young professional Caucasians who have moved into nearby condominiums constructed in the last few years. Therefore, the above percentage does not take into account the projects where most African American live with their families. Racial divisions and problems, including the heavy presence of gangs and a large economic divide between the well-off and those less fortunate, have caused many challenges in the community of Arverne. Likely, most of the churches within the neighborhood considered to be “Black churches” are all facing similar struggles, but the newest challenge is reaching incoming residents who have no knowledge and no connection to the Black church. Each of these nearby churches face the same challenge: how to draw the new residents of Arverne to their churches.

¹ Percept Group, "Zero Faith by Zip," accessed September 20, 2016, <http://www.PerceptGroup.com>.

CHAPTER 1: ANALYSIS OF THE CHURCH CONTEXT

Two of the many factors that affect churches are their presence and their location. A certain presence creates a culture in the organization that causes people to identify and appreciate each other's similarities and differences. Location creates the mutual meeting place that those who come are looking to fulfill needs and get answers to questions they may have that will improve their lives. Both concepts of presence and location are integral to a church's growth and lifespan. One cannot survive without the other as both are dependent on each other. Location without a presence that impacts the surrounding community is not considered a church, but rather a club. Churches must be easily discoverable and ought to have a daily and weekly impact on the lives of those within the community.

Bethel AME church is directly faced with these two important indicators that can either determine or depress church growth. The church is in the middle of the block and away from the main street. Additionally, the streets surrounding the church are marked as private streets due to the new condominium developments. Therefore, parking is limited to directly in front of the church or wherever it is found in surrounding non private streets. Parking directly in front of the church requires a permit from the City of New York and can only park approximately three sedan-sized cars.

Many of the other churches in the same community of Bethel AME are located on the corners of Rockaway Parkway, the main boulevard in Arverne. Individuals searching

for a church will see the other churches first before they see Bethel AME church. Additionally, most of the more prominently placed churches are Baptist, and with their robust worship style, those passing by on the sidewalk can hear the singing, music, drums, and even the preaching. This is enough to draw individuals interested in finding a church from the streets to the inside. Unlike Bethel, where pastors are installed for one year at a time, other pastors within the Arverne community have either grown up within the community or have pastored at their church for over ten years. The limited period of service in the AME church, without knowing when the pastor will be transferred or his service at the present church will end, causes a lack of meaningful relationships to be built and discourages trust and unity within the church. Additionally, the maturing of the relationship between the pastor and congregants is not entirely realized, making them unable to build the same long-term relationships that other pastors have within the community.

While Bethel AME church is covered by the larger umbrella of the AME denomination, which has supervision over the policies and procedures in place for the governance of the church, it is the local pastor who has the real oversight of the church's day-to-day activities. When necessary, pastors consult with the current manual of African Methodist Episcopal Church Discipline for applying rules and regulations instituted during the General Conference, an event held by presiding church bishops every four years. The rules of church discipline come from all sectors of the church body that submit amendments to the current policies. These policies are then voted for or against during an election within the General Conference year.

Armed with the power to oversee the local church, it is necessary that the serving pastor relays a vision, a mission, and a purpose to the church during each conference year. In the creation of these mandates, the leadership and the pastor ought to know that there is a plan to include the community within their growth.

Analysis of the Setting

A common question asked weekly among church-going communities is “how was the church today?” It is the imaginary poll that the preached word, the worship music, and the members of the church use to identify whether the person attending church had a great or not-so-great time. While the answer and the experience of each attending person may be entirely different from the person next to them, it is still a question the ushers ask after the completion of Sunday worship at Bethel AME. The ushers make a note of the answers and then give them to the pastor, who uses the results as feedback for adjustment or improvement.

The Bethel AME church follows an “order of worship” which is a structured guideline of what follows next in the service. This order of worship is a guideline given by the denomination and is outlined within the Discipline. Every church within the denomination may make additions and substitutions as they see fit per the culture and make-up of the community they are serving. Bethel AME follows the original guideline of the outlined order of worship closely as stated in the AME Discipline. Songs and themes are also uniquely different in each church within the denomination. Due to the elderly make-up of the present Bethel church, songs are traditional hymns and little or no contemporary songs. Unlike many of its nearby churches, Bethel AME has no choir,

organ player, or worship leader. The preacher leads the entire order of worship until the main event of preaching.

The elderly congregants do not often volunteer to take on a role that requires them to be at the forefront. The spark of their younger years has dimmed, and it is reflected in their passive preference of worship. Since he is the only minister on staff, the view from the congregation is of one pastor who stands at the pulpit by himself. The reverse view from the pulpit is of an aging congregation of ten to twelve members who mostly sit on one side near the front. The benches in the rest of the church are empty. On any given Sunday in the summer, the noise of the air conditioner is noticeably louder than the singing of the members in attendance. The singing is that of broken tones and keys with the symphony of togetherness lost from the start of the song.

Churches are also graded on the level of their worship through music and singing. Many of the members are retired senior citizens on a set income whose weekly giving has not been enough to compensate for musicians and singers. Yet, at the end of the service for these members, their weekly answer is consistent: "Church was good!"

The level of worship to which they have become accustomed is by far not the norm for the average church goer, much less a younger person. One can visually see that half way through the hour and thirty minutes of the service, some of these senior citizens have already fallen asleep or are nodding off. Their attention is regained during the benediction when they are asked to stand. This is their Sunday morning worship routine established over decades of similar experience. They have seen the full cycle of the history of the church from its aspiring birth to its full glory and now its gradual decline.

Truth be told, the elderly citizens of Bethel AME are not ready to market, evangelize, or rebuild the church to fill its pews. The toll of their age and the pervasive sicknesses that they experience have taken much of their strength and energy. Their continued responsibility may be to live a life of continued prayer.

Analysis of the Needs, Problems, and Opportunities

The Needs

The fundamental need of Bethel AME church in Arverne is more resources to help and inform the community. These additional resources are needed to adequately reach both those in direct proximity to the church and those who live in the projects between ten to twenty blocks away from the church. This need is not only for more money but also for more people to explain to the community what the church is about and where the church is located. Those within the community who patronize the food pantry on Thursdays see the need first hand for the food pantry but do not immediately see the need to become members of the church. This could possibly be due to the many options of other churches closer to where they live. This spreading of information about the church ought to be done by those who are convinced that the church has a message about Christ Jesus that can help people to live better lives. Classic church growth authors, Donald McGavran and Win Arn, in speaking about what it takes for a church to grow, stress the need for an “unshakable conviction” similar to that of the early church¹. In other words, those who spread information need to be totally convinced that the people within the neighborhood must know of the church and the gospel.

¹ Donald McGavran and Win Arn, *Back to Basics in Church Growth* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers Inc, 1981). Pg.21

The idea that the message must be “sold” is also a mental stumbling block in the minds of those who attend the church and are asked to share information about the church. Understandably, they are uncomfortable with the word “sell.” Selling is a word that may have many negative connotations, as in the manner of what is said of a “used car salesman.” It is an issue of trust and loyalty. However, while the word sell should be toned down when share the gospel message, it is still necessary to have the attitude and conviction of a salesperson. Therefore, this need of the church was to assemble men and women who were comfortable with the idea that the message of the Gospel had to be “sold,” and coming to Bethel AME church to hear more. This would reduce the amount of additional time spent on training and introduce specific phraseologies in sharing the message of the gospel. In doing so, it would not conflict with their mental values or cause anyone to feel uncomfortable in the missions’ aspect of the work.

This sales-based understanding of how to reach the community recognized that the old mentality of “hoping” people would show up or leaving it to the elderly congregation to spread the word about the church was not effective. It became apparent that there was a need to reach and sell the mission of the church to the external community. The church community, including the regular attendees who were mostly senior citizens, had to be re-convinced and re-taught the purpose, the mission, the vision and the message of Christ that was shared in the church weekly.

Bethel AME church was operating blindly with symptoms that indicated that its doors should have already been closed to the community. It was evident that the members of Bethel were oblivious to the real issues of their dying congregation. Perhaps contentment had settled in and to change anything would have interfered with their

comfort zone about how the leadership had come to operate. The idea of looking at Bethel as a broken or failing church did not come as a thought to the elderly of this church, who by now had gotten accustomed to a worship service in which most of the voices sounded the same. When all the voices of the congregation sound the same to all who are participating in the worship, it is hard to diagnose what—if anything—is broken or failing.

In order to determine what is possible for the growth of the church, the pastor and the church's leadership need to incorporate a philosophy of re-invention and new life to the members of the church community. This is where the Lay Advisory Committee can create a strategy that allows the church to have a resounding “echo” of its internal message to the external community².

The Problem

The biggest issue that Bethel AME church is facing is its declining membership. The church is faced with two choices: to close its door to the community or to strategically find ways to build its present membership. Within the last ten to fifteen years the church has lost over seventy-five percent of its membership. At the height of its worship and growth, it boasted over three hundred members. Now only twenty or less attend Sunday worship. Additionally, all the leaders and official members are between the ages sixty -seven and eighty -five. In other words, no young adults or children attend worship.

² Michele Hunt, “Michele Hunt Interviews the Iconic Peter Drucker,” filmed 1994, YouTube video, 31:00, posted April 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FygzmlVYlhQ>.

To add to the already existing problem, the church is predominantly surrounded by a new housing development known as Arverne By the Sea. Created through eminent domain, the new homes and condominium development incorporates demographic residents that are primarily Caucasian and other non black ethnicities. Because of eminent domain, the community of Arverne resembles a vacation hot spot full of younger, wealthier visitors. The new businesses and vendors within the neighborhood cater to beach focused activities like surfing and water sports. The prices of food at the restaurants has also increased. Due to this change, many of the demographics that surround the church are young white males and females who are thinking of starting a family and have no connection to the “black” church or the black residents who live ten blocks away within the projects.

Those who avail themselves of the food pantry are people and residents who live outside the new development and who may or may not live within the housing projects on the outskirts of the new development. The Community Board and residents of the new development view the people coming to the food pantry on Thursdays as a dangerous intrusion on their neighborhood. The Community Board’s contempt was demonstrated as letters were sent to the local Councilman’s office to do something about the pantry. Their concern is that these poorer people may break into their cars and homes and endanger their families. It was very obvious Bethel AME church needed a new re-positioning within the community. Out of that individuals were chosen from the congregation, families, and friends who would become a part of the Lay Advisory Committee.

The Lay Advisory Committee is committed to helping the church find its purpose and reason of why it should still be open. Further, it will contribute to identify within the

community those who come to the pantry and may be willing to become a part of the body of the congregation. There were many variables that the committee had to look at in Bethel AME's past years. These variables identified the causes and effects of what helped to make the church one of the strongest during the height of its ministry and operation.

The Bethel AME church continues to hemorrhage financially, physically, and mentally. The church has one financial advantage: it is free and clear of any mortgage obligation. In the late nineties, the church met its financial obligation and had its "mortgage burning ceremony."³ Since many of its members are senior citizens with set salaries, however, the church has many red flags financially. The advantage of being mortgage free has not enabled the church to be financially flexible in terms of its other monthly responsibilities. Additionally, its balance sheet has shown more liabilities than assets within the last twenty years. These liabilities are mandated obligations required by the denomination as assessments due at various intervals of the ecclesiastical cycle. These financial obligations range in amounts from five hundred dollars to well over five thousand dollars during events such as the annual conference of the church. The seniors find ways to pay these assessments by donating more and by coordinating prayer breakfast meetings. The large number of assessments affects the entire Bethel AME, especially the pastor who often goes without pay. This scenario creates possible resentments. The pastor might resent the congregants, and congregants might feel resentment towards the denomination for the financial burden of the assessments and

³ Tamsen Butler, "Church Mortgage Burning Services," accessed September 27, 2016. www.churchmortgageburning.com.

frustration that the larger denomination is not more sympathetic towards their financial plight.

The cry for sympathy is usually unheard, and former presiding Bishops' only showed leniency towards the complaints of previous pastors who did not receive compensation. Many times, the pastors would receive no compensation for months from the church which struggled to pay its debts.

In the case of Bethel AME, it is important to look at the bigger picture. The most significant problem for Bethel AME currently is to ask whether or not it should continue to keep its doors open. The odds are not in favor of this church staying open, but, if it continues to simply make its assessment payments on time, then the larger denomination will not see the reason to make specific decisions concerning the church.

The present elderly members who make up much of the Bethel AME congregation will do whatever it takes to keep the doors open for the sake of history and for their comfort. As the current pastor who sees and understands the urgency of what ought to happen, I have made some controversial statements about how to make the church grow and suggested that the congregants are blatantly ignoring the signs that the church is in imminent danger of closing. With the congregation refusing to meet their new neighbors because of the color divide, the church's mission to evangelize their new neighbors goes unfulfilled. This is not an aspect of a lack of faith in action but rather a hope to mitigate the communal shame of the long-standing members should they be forced to close the church's doors.

In its ninety-six years of operation, many individuals have been married, baptized, died, and buried through the services offered by Bethel AME. To close the doors of this

church is to close the door on the deceased family members and their descendants still attending Bethel AME. With most of the members of the church being senior citizens, the Bethel AME church represents an integral part of the memories of many years.

Currently, Bethel AME shows a total membership of fifty-three on file, the same number listed at the 2016 New York Annual Conference. This figure, however, is incorrect as only twenty-three individuals have been coming over the last four to five years. The other thirty are members who have either died and are still on file or those who have relocated. The church makes consistent effort to reach those members that have not shown up within a year.

The Opportunity

The message of the gospel in the twenty-first century is not limited by a church location. Both John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ each had successful ministries even though they lacked a church building. Usually, they could be found teaching without the luxury of the four walls of the Temple or a synagogue. Since Bethel AME church is not on a corner or a main street, many local residents are unaware that it even exists. In a survey, one congregant pointed out that his family was not aware of the church's existence, even while attending another church only four blocks away. However, many of the residents of Far Rockaway and specifically those within the Arverne zip code are very much familiar with the food pantry located on the lower level fellowship hall, even though they may not be familiar with the time of the service or what happens in the sanctuary. Currently, no information about the church is posted anywhere in the food pantry. My contention is that the church is missing an opportunity to make those who

visit the weekly food pantry aware of the church's ministries. This would especially be a win-win situation for the church, as it lowers the cost of marketing and mailings.

The church should capitalize on the fact that people are already coming to the pantry every Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The food pantry is only closed for three weeks of the year during the month of August. Therefore, the church has a complete calendar year to market and invest in the people who are coming to get their weekly food bags. During the course of the year, church leadership could differentiate those who are regulars to the pantry and attend another neighborhood church, from those who are new to the neighborhood and have not attended a church or maybe looking for a new church. The possibilities and opportunities are endless as the gospel message of the Cross is fulfilled in the benevolence of the pantry ministry. Individuals and their families are given food so that no one in their household—whether child or adult—should go hungry. However, while the benevolence of this ministry reaches the stomachs of those in the neighborhood, the mental and spiritual lives of those who are not members of a church or do not regularly attend a church are left starved.

Due to New York City regulations, every person attending the food pantry must present valid identification and answer a few questions about anyone else living in their homes. City requirements mandate pantry volunteers to ask two specific questions: 1) how many children are living in the home? and 2) how many adults under the age of sixty live in the home? With over one hundred and forty families coming weekly, that is an abundance of information that can be readily accessible by the church. Over the last ten to twenty years, the church has been overlooking a weekly opportunity for growth: the long lines of weekly food pantry patrons. I would go so far as to argue that Bethel AME

church has a responsibility of stewardship to take advantage of this incredible opportunity right at its door steps.

Three things needed to be recognized and accepted before Bethel AME church decided to consider who are its potential congregants. First, as a congregation, it was necessary to face the present truth regarding our aging congregation. Second, if the pantry was its main opportunity, how did we need to change our perspective in order to take a fresh look at the pantry? Third, having recognized the opportunity, what added value, service, and difference could the church offer to the pantry and to the people of the neighborhood?

Not only was it great for the church to better understand its area of opportunity; it was also essential to know what set it apart from all the other thirty-nine churches within the church's zip code. Bethel AME needed to differentiate itself from the numerous other churches in order to attract visitors from far and near who want to make it their church home. It had to change the dominant image of the church as primarily a food pantry. It was not only called to feed the people but to transform the lives of those it served.

The need for differentiation should not rely on clichés like “think outside of the box.” For a religious organization, thinking outside of the box usually still means working within the confines of what is deemed acceptable to the larger congregation. The committee recommended that the church needed a proven model with small strategies that produced identifiable and noticeable results. The key to getting the information out was to focus on the word “little,” instead of focusing on larger projects that would require more resources and money. By using the word little in our conversations with congregants and with vendors, it removed the assumption that much was required of them

or that they were being asked to do much more than they could afford or do. The limitation of the church's resources was not a matter of church budget and allocation, but rather the reality that it did not have existing funds or any budget at all. By all measurable standards of a business or nonprofit, the church was financially broke.

Armed with the knowledge of the church's financial weakness, the Lay Advisory Committee focused instead on using everyone's acquired skills, talents and, abilities to create bootstrap materials via businesses that offered free services to nonprofit organizations. The committee assumed that there would be endless opportunities and resources within the neighborhood that Bethel AME church could use for free, especially because of their length of time in the community. While this was a naïve assumption, it proved to be worthwhile, since the community of Arverne did provide an assortment of resources for struggling nonprofit organizations. This experience showed that some businesses were even willing to lower costs if a minimum order was met. In addition, it allowed the committee and church to reach out and become familiar with the resources within the community that could be great assets in starting the upward movement of the church. One example of this is the Wave community newspaper that committed to providing advertisements about the functions of the church on a weekly basis for free.⁴ Not only was this an opportunity to bring awareness to the immediate community surrounding Bethel AME but, also to all readership areas of the Rockaway community where the newspaper was available.

⁴ Dan Guarino, "Meet Pastor Allen," *Meet Pastor Allen, Bethel AME*, September 15, 2015, accessed September 28, 2016.pg.3

The discovery of the community paper was an immediate win for the church because members became excited when they saw a full-page article about the church rather than just a classified advertisement. Despite the initial enthusiasm, there was obviously much more work that needed to be accomplished. The common plan was to look at the work of Peter Drucker, specifically his management ideas for the growth of nonprofit organizations.⁵ More than any of the other authors that were discussed, Peter Drucker's work specifically addressed practical questions and tools that were accessible and could be used by the committee. The principles and the strategies outlined in Peter Drucker's work not only caused a shift in the philosophical thinking of the church but also cause remarkable growth and development in the committee members themselves. However, we first had to fully understand why we wanted to use Mr. Drucker's work and introduce his ideas and concepts into the mindset of the congregation before the inevitable question came to us of "Why Peter Drucker"⁶? This was not just a matter of saying that the author's principles specifically addressed the issue. This was finding tools and principles that affected a congregation that was facing changes in many capacities.

The first change they experienced was the installation of a new and much younger pastor. During my installation, the congregation had to cope with what was a rapid removal of the previous pastor. The congregation regarded this sudden change as disrespectful to them especially without the leadership given notice. As the new pastor, I saw how healing was critical and important for the journey ahead. It was now time to help the church, the members, and the community come together. The best way to do this

⁵ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Practices and Principles* (New York: Harper Business, 1992). 89.

⁶ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing in a Time of Great Change* (New York: Truman Talley Books/Dutton, 1995).67.

was through the principles, strategies, and methodology of Peter Drucker's work. In particular, the most important question was, "who are our congregants?"

Peter Drucker has spent years writing and lecturing to secular organizations about their approach to the market and to their employees. His principles have been found to be ideal for both large and small organizations. Drucker suggests that organizational leaders ask subjective assessment questions to their leadership and strategy teams to identify the direction in which the company is going. The questions looked at the services offered by the company and why they were offering those particular services. Mr. Drucker found that because nonprofits and churches do not have a bottom line, they rarely consider their operation as a business with balance sheets, people, targets, and goals⁷. Yet, in not having those critical elements, nonprofits and churches struggle and tend to blame any failures on the person at the helm of the company, i.e. the pastor. Churches tend to blame pastors if the church is not successfully operating in the way they think it should. Their way of solving this is to replace the pastor until they see change. However, real change comes when the organization begins to assess its type of business, why it is in that business, and what the outcome and results of that business should be. The Lay Advisory Committee used the principles of Peter Drucker throughout several months of the project to seek results and test variables. The implementation of these procedures caused Bethel AME church to experience growth for the first time in twenty years.

⁷ Peter F. Drucker, Peter M. Senge, and Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management., *Leading in a Time of Change: A Conversation with Peter F. Drucker & Peter M. Senge: Viewer's Workbook* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). 87.

CHAPTER 2: WHY PETER DRUCKER?

Change within an organization not only affects the individuals within the organization but affects the wellbeing of the organizational structure¹. While the set parameters of change can be predictable, at most times they are not. Change can be presented to the congregation, and one would expect that everyone would be on board. Yet not everyone wanted to change to happen because they had become comfortable with the status quo. The main focus of change at Bethel AME is the building and re-building of the relationships between pastor and members, church and the external community, and members with members. Each one of these relationships has an unpredictable element that encourages one to pull away from the other; but, these groups need each other to be whole and to achieve the systematic integration and growth of the body².

This interconnected philosophy of a community was not a common notion among those in the congregation, and some did not even understand what it meant. In determining where to start and in identifying who our congregants are, the Lay Advisory Committee brainstormed and realized that it was necessary to start with the culture and philosophy of Bethel AME. Was it possible that their philosophy on church and community development were negatively and perhaps unconsciously affecting the church

¹ Carl E. Savage et al., *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008). 105.

² R. Paul Stevens and Phil Collins, *The Equipping Pastor: A Systems Approach to Congregational Leadership* ([Washington, DC]: Alban Institute, 1993), 153.

and its growth? It was understood that the leaders of Bethel AME did not see the operations of the church as a form of business. Therefore, it became necessary to search for a model that showed how the business aspect of a church works with the spiritual aspect of it. There are many books on churches and church growth, but the theoretical ideas of Peter F. Drucker and his work on nonprofit organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Girls Scout of America, stood out as ideal place for Bethel AME church to evaluate the philosophy of the church.³ Yet, exploring how to respond to the congregational thought process and convincing them of why the church needed to be better integrated within the community all week and not just on Sunday was no easy feat.

This was a congregation who did not see the need for the pantry and its service. Due to unhealthy relationships within the church, the present leaders and members did not see the need for a food pantry and regarded it with the same suspicion that the wider community had for the pantry. While the pantry was operated through a 501(c) Charter corporation of the church called Bethel Development Corporation, only two members of the church worked and operated the pantry. All the other volunteers belonged to surrounding churches and had never attended any of the services of Bethel AME. Not only did the pantry seem as if it was a separate operation; the members of the church had no commitment, loyalty, or association to it.

The congregational perspective of the pantry needed to shift towards an understanding of the pantry as necessary to the survival of Bethel AME. In validating the pantry as being necessary, I asked the leaders and members to either hand out the food

³ Peter F. Drucker, *Classic Drucker: Essential Wisdom of Peter Drucker from the Pages of Harvard Business Review* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Book, 2006). Peter Drucker is the author of 39 books and is considered a management guru. His books focus on the management of nonprofits, specifically the principles and practices that help organizations move from failure to longevity.

bags on Thursdays or volunteer as time would allow during the rest of the week. This was an initial gauge of their attitude towards the people in the pantry line and the pantry itself. Additionally, the Lay Advisory Committee wanted to see if these retired seniors would use their free time to make a difference.

The result was astounding. Over the next six months, none of the leaders volunteered on any Thursday. This initial test to determine interest among church leadership reinforced to me why it was important to start with Peter Drucker's principles.

In his book *The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask about Your Nonprofit Organization*, Peter Drucker makes a point of stating that there are five questions nonprofit organizations need to answer.⁴

- What is our business (mission)?
- Who is our customer?
- What does the customer value?
- What have been our results?
- What is our plan?⁵

The questions and answers derived from Mr. Drucker's assessment questions suggested the template for the information the advisory group was seeking both internally and externally. Interestingly when they asked the first question it was met with rejection and angst. The leaders replied that the church was not a business. I expected this answer. What was not expected was the anger it caused in the leaders and their perception that the committee was hoping to secularize the holy. As the leaders and the lay advisor group shared their concerns over the suggested approach of working with the food pantry and soliciting help from within the leadership, it was apparent that their concern for growth

⁴ Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*. 56.

⁵ Peter F. Drucker, Frances Hesselbein, and Peter Economy, *Peter Drucker's Five Most Important Questions: Enduring Wisdom for Young Leaders* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).120.

was not an urgent priority. It was now up to the Lay Advisory Committee to work independently and to share their findings during the monthly meeting with the leaders regardless of the opposition they faced.

Looking at the behavior from a different angle brought clarity, and they sensed the need for change. That they were unaware of how to enact change made it clear to the committee that the congregants did not understand or know what the mission of the church was. The church had no set goals, mission, vision, or value statement that focused the leaders' attentions. The dissenting leaders became a major factor in helping the group understand behaviors during the change. It was clear that the Lay Advisory Committee was confronting head-on the "elephant in the room" that no one wanted to address. In their book *The Equipping Pastor*, Paul Stevens and Phil Collins, two well-known pastors and authors, mentioned that a constructive way to look at churches in crisis is to look at the "Chinese word for crisis which is composed of two characters, one meaning 'danger' and the other 'opportunity.' The systematic pastor welcomes the opportunity of every crisis. Sometimes he or she will provoke one."⁶

Peter Drucker's first and second questions—what is our mission and who is our customer—are considered provoking questions, specifically in regard to Bethel AME and this project thesis. If the mission is not known, then having clarity on who the congregants of the church are will be a convoluted matter. The process of what must be first realized and the action of the next steps is a process of church growth on which all participants must agree. Those two questions form the template for the initial steps and clarify what is needed and what must be done moving forward.

⁶ Stevens and Collins, *The Equipping Pastor*, 55.

By implementing the principles of Peter Drucker, we were able to take a thorough and focused look at the extent to which the decline over the years was a result of built-in inertia. In the initial stage of the project, the committee saw the Sunday morning service as an opportune time to understand how the congregation viewed an active mission focus in the local community. It was quickly determined that the members had a “David and Goliath” mentality toward ministering to the community. In this scenario, the community is Goliath due to the sheer intimidation of its size, and the effort required seemed too daunting for the church leadership. Thus, they stood on the sidelines and watched while the church deteriorated spiritually, financially, and publicly within the community.

First things first when looking at the principles of Peter Drucker, it is necessary to ask “*What are we trying to achieve?*”? Answering this question will help determine the mission of the church.⁷ The reason why this is critically important for Bethel AME is because if their answer to the question is simply “to save souls,” according to Drucker’s principles, they are critically misguided. Their answer needs to include more holistic goals to provide extended resources to individuals and families during their faith journey. The intention of the church is to help anyone who comes to the altar and decides to change. Once the decision for change has been made, the church can help them obtain the necessary resources to find the answers they may seek.

Bethel AME is positioned to be an agent of change in Arverne. This is its greatest asset. Answering the question “*What are we hoping to achieve?*” will enable the church to determine what resources are currently missing in the community. These missing resources are the church’s future ministry opportunities.

⁷ Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*. 134.

With seven churches directly surrounding Bethel AME, the church must differentiate what it is offering and determine a “benchmark” that may or may not be found in any of the other seven churches. In a neighborhood survey conducted by the Lay Advisory Committee, commuters rated which churches they would go to first in order from one to ten. The survey found that the majority of commuters opted to attend one of the four Baptist churches. More commuters numbered Bethel AME the lowest rating of “ten” than any of the other seven churches. Many survey respondents thought the church was either closed or was just a food pantry. Many also had no idea what the letters of AME meant. Those who knew what it meant expressed that the church was boring in comparison to St. John’s Baptist Church three blocks away, which they considered more upbeat and vibrant. Interestingly, none of the people who took the survey knew the motto, vision, or mission statement of all seven churches. One survey question was an off-topic question about the Allstate insurance slogan. When asked what the motto or the slogan of Allstate was, all that were surveyed replied: “You’re in Good Hands with Allstate.”⁸ This exercise was to see if it would help if Bethel AME church should incorporate a slogan within the community about what it offers.

The principles of Peter Drucker are rooted in receiving cyclical feedback from the community that the church is called to serve. Usually what happens is that the church tells the community what they need and what they ought to do. In other words, churches sometimes force their doctrine and dogma on individuals. The community, however, is looking to be heard and hoping the church understands their needs and wants before they commit to the church. Both the community and the church can learn from each other

⁸ Leo Burnette, “Advertising Slogans Hall of Fame,” October 17, 2016, www.adslogans.co.uk/site/pages/gallery/youre-in-good-hands-with-allstate.

through the process of reciprocity and sensitivity. Both parties need to be sensitive to each other's needs as they relate to their families, counseling, economic resources, spiritual guidance, and community enhancement. Dr. Richard Bandler noted author and creativity expert in Design Human Engineering observed the necessity of feedback in his book *Persuasion Engineering*.⁹

There are some good strategies out there except for one thing: they don't have the loop where the person continues to learn throughout their lives. Just because they have a strategy that works today, doesn't mean it will work tomorrow, or even next year, as variables change in the environment. I know companies that have come close to or even have failed because of their inability to **respond** to the environment. Feedback is the "breakfast of champions."¹⁰

The ability to be able to respond to the immediate needs of the people of Arverne and Far Rockaway is what Bethel AME church is seeking to accomplish each day. It needs to establish that the ability to respond is not limited to Sunday mornings during the regular weekly service. Responding to the community requires the continual meeting of needs, filling of voids, and the commitment to meeting people at their station in life. The ultimate intention should be to teach individuals how to lead more productive lives.

The second question that Peter Drucker asks seeks to determine who the people the church identifies as "customers" or congregants. Although that is the primary focus, Drucker suggests four other observatory questions that clarify the second question so ideal for organizations that seek to be better aware of the reasoning behind its decisions and actions.

⁹ Richard Bandler and John La Valle, *Persuasion Engineering* (Capitola, CA: Meta Publications Inc, 1996), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid. 11.

Most individual churches in the AME denomination are guided by the AME discipline book and its rules, procedures, and regulations. While it is intended to be followed closely, the denomination has included a clause that gives each local church within its conference and within any neighborhood, culture, genre, and demographic the ability to adjust and implement its own practices if those will better develop the church and community. Bethel AME church in Arverne may have lost its original church mission and vision statement, but as it is considered a “connectional church,” the AME denomination maintains a corporate and universal mission, vision, objective, and purpose statement that highlights the objectives that Bethel AME can adopt as its own.¹¹ The fundamental statements of the AME denomination meet the criteria in Peter Drucker’s assessment questions. The denomination website highlights the four perspectives of the church through the following statements:

Our Mission: The mission of the AME church is to minister to the social, spiritual, and physical development of all people.

The Vision: At every level of the connection and in every local church, the AME church shall engage in carrying out the spirit of the original Free African Society, out of which the AME church evolved: that is, to seek out and save the lost, and to serve the needy. It is also the duty of the church to continue to encourage all members to become involved in all aspects of church training.

The Purpose: 1. Make available God’s biblical principles. 2. Spread Christ’s liberating Gospel; 3. Provide continuing programs which will enhance the entire social development of all people.

The Objective: To meet the needs of every level of the connection and in every local church, the AME church shall implement strategies to train all members in (1) Christian discipleship; (2) Christian leadership (3) current teaching methods

¹¹ The term connectional means that each local church is interlocked through its district and state conference of many churches. Bethel Arverne AME is within the First Episcopal District which comprises of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Bermuda, New England, Boston, Connecticut, and Philadelphia. All of these areas consists of more than 300 hundred churches and is overseen by one Presiding Prelate.

(4) the history and significance of the AME Church (5) God's biblical principles (6) social development to which all should be applied to daily living.¹²

In its mission and vision statements, the AME denomination has equipped the churches that may not have the time and manpower to come up with their own in-house statements. They are applicable as broad blanket statements that can be made should any local church need to know its purpose and premise within the community. As applicable as they are, it remains to be asked and seen if these statements in their entirety are enough for Bethel AME to use in its implementation of strategies to transform the church from a weak church to a stronger church; from a failing church to a church that is growing; from a church that has no interaction with the people within its immediate reach to a church that ministers to those who avail themselves of the weekly food pantry.

An analysis of the statements made on the AME website reveals one overarching theme and focus that can be seen in almost each line. The statements are blanket statements and, due to the main thought of "spirituality" in each of its statement, it does not address churches and communities that are in distress due to the performance of the church. The denomination needs to assess further whether or not the struggling of the church is a reflection of broader issues within the local community. If so, who should be the first to address the problems, the church or the community? Perhaps at such a crossroad the church and the community should work together to find out what is important and valuable to each other, especially if the results are less than promising. Bethel AME needs the tools and resources that their leadership staff—those who have lived in the community for most of their lives—can better utilize. A small church with

¹² General Secretary of the AME Church, "African Methodist Episcopal Church," AMEC, accessed October 17, 2016, <https://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-mission>.

senior citizens who have been out of school for fifty plus years lacks the knowledge to effectively know and harness the tools to reach a large community. They are more knowledgeable about how to conduct a church fish fry or the best strategies for a baked good fundraiser. They are familiar with what has worked for them in the past that have carried the church over many years than they are about current marketing strategies.

Admittedly, not too far in the past, the fish fry and the baked goods sale would have been effective ways for the church to interact with the community. These tactics may still work for some churches, but in the evolving of community of Arverne, Bethel AME has not found such methods as effective. Yet, despite the turbulence it has faced over the years, the church is still open. There is still time to implement change. The change can be found in an open-minded and focused look at its blueprint and paradigm so that the lessons learned will sustain it for the foreseeable future.

In an effort to focus on missions, Drucker argues that many churches find themselves saying yes and committing to activities that likely they should have said no to in the first place. Many times, it looks and sounds like a good cause, and even if it is a worthwhile cause, he emphasizes that the church should focus on its strengths within the community and not try to be an organization that tries to do too much.¹³

The inclination to be a do-it-all organization simply means that the church is getting involved in activities that other social organizations could be better off doing because they are equipped with the proper resources. While the church may be an organization that can minister to people, help needed people find housing, involve themselves in political matters, and reach out to government agencies on behalf of

¹³ Drucker, *The Five Most Important Questions*, 3.

individuals, these ministries should not detract from the church's primary service, which is to help people spiritually. Drucker makes the following critical observation for churches and nonprofits: "an important point to remember, incidentally, in designing a non-profit's service and marketing is to focus only on those things you are competent to do."¹⁴ Churches are most competent in the business of transforming and changing lives so that those who are transformed can go into their communities and transform their situations and their environments. Anything else is an auxiliary of its primary calling and reason for existing in the community.

Internal and External Analysis for Improvement

Bethel AME was well overdue for an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. In implementing the first principle of Peter Drucker, the Lay Advisory Committee performed a SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, threats) analysis of the church. This was necessary for the church to stay open and remain independent, instead of looking to merge with the sister church Bethel AME-Far Rockaway located three and a half miles south of Bethel AME-Arverne. In a comparative look at the annual report for both churches, Bethel AME-Far Rockaway's resources and growth chart surpassed Bethel AME-Arverne by eighty percent. The percentage distance between the two churches was significant enough to require further analysis. The mitigating factors were the growth of the Far Rockaway church in the last twelve months, an increased annual income, and the success of their recent mission activities.

Bethel AME church is within one block of a beach and a row of local shops that in the summer are filled with tourists and locals. Its proximity to the beach comes with

¹⁴ Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, 55.

advantages and disadvantages during the months of September to March when the temperature drops significantly. This factor had to be taken into account during the SWOT assessment since the harsh weather affects the building as well as influences church attendance. However, it would detract from a real evaluation, if the other seven churches in the community were not looked at during these months since they also have to deal with the adverse effects of the weather.

Unlike the other seven churches directly surrounding Bethel AME, in a twenty-year period, the church experienced five fires and two severe hurricanes, all of which significantly damaged the church building. The last hurricane that totally ravaged the church was in the year 2012 when Hurricane Sandy destroyed most of the homes and flooded many churches in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, Bethel AME was destroyed and closed for a period of two years. During the time the church was closed, the leaders and some members met and worshiped at other churches in the Rockaway community who shared their church space with them.

Church records reveal that the five fires that had previously destroyed the church before Sandy drastically reduced church membership. Congregants became restless moving from one building to the next. The first few fires were in the mid-eighties and were attributed to specific racial and ethnic tensions in the Rockaways that were targeting black churches. The other fires were due to the church allowing homeless individuals to occupy and sleep in the pantry. With every successive fire, members gradually stopped coming to the church and started attending other neighborhood churches. Prior to the displacement that happened due to hurricane Sandy and the fires, the church had on record a total of over two hundred and fifty members. After the fires and the destruction

from the hurricanes, the membership was reduced to fifty-three members with only fifteen active ones showing up regularly. The damage was done both structurally to the building and to church's relationship to the community. In addition, there was more invisible damage to the hearts and minds of those who were still coming. Discouragement settled in as a pervasive factor whenever they had to face either external or internal challenges. The pervasiveness of their discouragement partially came from a lack of involvement from the top leadership of the AME denomination that failed to act as a resource of encouragement for physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual help. Additionally, there were internal divisions between the members over whether or not the church should close. Some wanted to fight to keep it open, despite its structural and congregational decline, while others did not.

Annually the church gives over \$20,000 in assessments to the AME denomination. In 2015, the total amount of tithes and offerings collected by the church was \$40,000¹⁵. That means that exactly half of what the church collects goes towards the required assessments. With the remaining funds, the church must pay all its monthly bills, and the pastor's salary, as well as the cost of all other activities. One major reason for the church's difficult financial picture is due to Hurricane Sandy. The church's insurance refused to pay for the flooding, as hurricanes were not covered by the existing flood insurance. The church did not have enough money to rebuild and had to depend on various charities to donate materials for its reconstruction. While the sanctuary on the second floor received minimal damage, the entire food pantry and basement of the church had to be gutted and remodeled due to mold and other infectious elements. During this

¹⁵ The annual report of the Bethel AME Church in Arverne is public record and reported to the New York Annual AME conference. The 2015 report showed the church had a total income of \$40,000.

unfortunate time, many members of the church questioned why the new condominium developments surrounding the church failed to come to the aid of the church. While this frustration can be interpreted in various ways, it made the church reconsider how, after the rebuilding of the church, they could better engage the community.

The sister church of Bethel AME-Far Rockaway only received minimal damage from Hurricane Sandy, whereas Bethel AME-Arverne had to be closed for two years. Therefore, the comparison of growth and resources could not be a part of the cross-counter analysis of both churches. In assessing its strengths, one could evaluate the resiliency of the people as a testimony of the church. Such resiliency should be considered a marketable tool. The resiliency factor can be used when the church looks to reach out in the neighborhood for those who may be new to the Rockaways.

A report by the Percept Group, an organization that studies church demographics and the movements within neighborhoods, shows that a higher percentage of Caribbean immigrants are moving into the Rockaways in comparison to other ethnic groups.¹⁶ This provides the church with both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity to reach out to these new neighbors and find common ground in the resilience stories of the church with the resilience of the new neighbors. The immigrant experience, however, poses challenges, since new immigrants arriving in a new neighborhood sometimes encounter mental and emotional difficulties. For example, new Caribbean immigrants may have preconceived notions about the AME church that are informed by their home church.

¹⁶ Percept Group, "Zero Faith by Zip."

An actual count of the members who come to the church on Sundays is less than twenty-three. Some of the twenty-three who do come are elderly and on medications due to their age and their degenerative health. These are not the people who are optimistic and willing to go out on the streets, knock on the neighborhood doors, or stand at the street corners proselytizing the Gospel or spreading information about the church. During the first six months of the implementation of the project, the senior members who lived in Red Verne, a subsection of Arverne, Far Rockaway, invited the Lay Advisory Committee to a community fete. In watching the seniors and those with whom they mingled, I observed that they only spoke to the other adults their age and not the younger people. While the fair had an overwhelming number of young adults and children, the elderly only sat and spoke among themselves and only introduced the committee members to those they already knew.

Dennis Bickers, the church leadership consultant, and small church blog writer gave seven reasons why small churches fail¹⁷. One of the reasons was “due to the lots of gray hair of aging members who are dying, becoming ill, and no younger persons to replace them; because much of what the church does is geared for the older members.” In his article, Bickers further highlights a few of the principles that Peter Drucker lists in his top five questions. In particular, both stressed that a church must know its mission. Not knowing the mission, or forgetting the reason why they are there in the first place, will lead to the closure of a church. Bickers argued that “unless a church understands its God-given purpose and is attempting to live it out, one must question whether it is good

¹⁷ Dennis Bickers, "7 Reasons Smaller Churches Struggle and Close," *Ethics Daily*, accessed October 18, 2016, <http://www.ethicsdaily.com/7-reasons-smaller-churches-struggle-and-close-cms>.

stewardship for that church to continue.”¹⁸ Equating a struggling church with the question of stewardship speaks to the early issue in regard to the finances of the church and their communal attempts at a mission. However, stewardship must be accounted for when discussing how the church will allocate its time, teaching, and learning. Taking into account who the church currently has as its only members, it cannot delude itself into thinking that by simply not doing anything it will all work out. Such a delusion can assuage the current members and leadership and not allow them to see the gravity of the current broken situation. With this awareness, they will likely not ask the necessary and hard questions.

Bethel AME as a Successful Model and Methodology

I analyzed the works of Peter Drucker because of his contribution to consulting on nonprofit organizations and churches. Drucker specifically consulted for churches that were failing to recognize how the same problems that affected nonprofit organizations affected churches, especially because nonprofits and churches do not operate on a bottom line financial margin. Through his work and consulting, many churches which implemented his strategies were able to come back from the point of foreclosure or near closure. The diagnosis of Bethel AME church and the reality it is facing is that it is not a successful church but rather a failed or failing church. However, while that is the reality of Bethel AME, it is also necessary to provide a framework, standard, or benchmark of what a strong church does look like.

A successful church definition is limited to this project and based on Bethel AME church growing in membership, resources, and a healthy attitude towards service in the

¹⁸ Ibid, 2. 5 -7.

community of Arverne. The churches that surround Bethel AME vary in size and have different methods of operating their weekly services. Some churches are weekend churches, and others have a regular set of ministries and services throughout the week. For many of the churches within the neighborhood, it is the continuous church activities that culminate in the greater service on either Saturday evening or Sunday morning. With each church having a different culture, different themes, and a different ministry concentration, it was difficult for the Lay Advisory Committee in Arverne to directly compare these churches to Bethel AME.

In interviewing four pastors who maintain a congregation size of over two hundred, the committee asked them about the challenges they faced in operating their church. The four pastors highlighted specific but common problems: drops in attendance, some drops in tithes and offerings, and a harder time getting new members to join their church. When asked if they considered their churches to be a success, the common response was “no.” The immediate question that followed that answer was to give their version of what a successful church looked like. Most responses were filled with adequate ministerial staff, enough new people in the benches each Sunday, responding to the call to join the church, and finally time away from the church without having to worry if the church will collapse. For the final question, they were asked to name a church they considered successful. All the four pastors mentioned either or both of the two megachurches near the Rockaways: Allen Cathedral AME in Queens and Christian Cultural Centre in Brooklyn.

The committee did not ask questions of the pastors that were new or ones they had not faced in the past. They understood that each church has its own problems, but

they were looking at the impact these churches had on their community. It is problematic for an organization to believe that the grass is greener on the other side. Taking into accounts its method of operation, it looked like Bethel AME falsely hoped that the church would one day regain its status as a growing church without the work that it needed to do in the pantry. If the cause is forgotten, the mission is forgotten along with all the goals and intentions of the organization. Peter Drucker highlights a practical methodology when analyzing the mission of an organization: “the mission answers the question: what are the results we want to achieve?”¹⁹

The results that Bethel AME church desires are not ones they can compare and equate with another church in the Arverne neighborhood. Rather, Bethel AME church wants to bring about a change in human lives and let those who are changed become a part of the church family. Since the decline in membership started over ten years ago, and with the dominant change of ethnicity and culture from the new developments, the signs suggested that the church had run its course. For it to survive, the future mission of Bethel AME must be one that is open to a total reconstruction of the image and the message of the church. Although the church is ninety-six years old, its many closures and a recent opening in 2014 after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy only makes the church two years old. Therefore, all aspects of the church must be reevaluated—from the church name and its letters to its location, leadership, and even the time of the Sunday morning worship service. The dominant Caucasian neighborhood and their children who go surfing on the weekends may need a different kind of church. While the message of the Gospel must remain the same, the strategies and methods that are used must be different

¹⁹ Drucker, *The Five Most Important Questions*, 9.

now that different ethnicities make up the Arverne-Far Rockaway community. Drucker stresses the critical nature of the mission of the church: “From the mission flow goals that define the desired future of the organization and the direction it will take. Objectives are specific and measurable levels of achievement that comes with action steps that help all aspects of the church”²⁰.

The church needs to focus its attention on two fundamental principles. First, the church needs to set future goals that will steer the church in a certain direction. Second, the church should divide these goals into short term weekly goals, monthly goals, and also annual goals that are mission-centered. The key here is to be realistic in the setting of the goals because of the limited resources of people and money. As the food pantry serves over one hundred and forty meals per week, these are the people the church should market to and try to reach. The task at hand is to meet the people while they are in the line and be conversational with them without having them feel confronted or embarrassed. The task might sound easy, but it is actually difficult to have the courage to approach the people in line and the wherewithal not to feel discouraged if some individuals outright reject them. The laws of New York State must be kept in mind while proselytizing. It should never be implied that people must come to church to get the food. No one in the line ought to be turned away from receiving food because they rejected the members of the church. It is their right to receive the food regardless. It is still the church’s responsibility to make sure it puts itself in the position to be able to nurture the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical condition of the people.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

The food pantry of the church is located in the basement of the church which is also referred to as the fellowship hall. Individuals who enter must first register at a table at the front of the church fellowship. Then they proceed to collect their food, most of which are bagged beforehand and placed on five circular tables in the fellowship hall. There is additional food for them to collect as well. The longest wait time for any of the families is in the line outside of the church. Once they are in the building, the average duration to register and collect their bags of food and then exit is four minutes.

Once we discovered the average amount of time one spent in the line, it was necessary to immediately create a strategy whereby we could convert our missional plan into action.²¹ The leaders suggested that I should serve weekly to make the people coming to the pantry meet the pastor face to face. Doing this would likely slow down the average wait by two minutes, making the total time in the pantry line on average six minutes. The strategy here is to interrupt the normal flow of “get and go” so that others in line can hear what is being said about who I was and about the church. I would then ask for a verbal commitment to attend church, and a call would be placed to the family reminding them about the service. These methods required patience, even as the church sets goals they would like to achieve within a given time frame.

The task for Bethel AME church was to create targets and plans that would be in sync with what it was hoping to do, and that was to build the church again and bring glory to God. Once the church got into a momentum of seeing that having plans and goals bring results, it will help with the overall morale of the congregation. Vision, plan,

²¹ Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, 53.

prayer, execution, and results are the variables that will be able to re-position Bethel AME in the hearts and the minds of the people of Arverne and Far Rockaway.

The congregation had to address key issues in regards to its health and the realization of long term goals. The leadership and the Lay Advisory Committee had to come to terms with specific weaknesses in the church as well as some of its strengths in working towards the project known as “Pantry Day.” In assessing both the strengths and the weaknesses, a few things stood out that were systemic to the church but at the same time workable.

Weaknesses

As the church only has nineteen to twenty congregants showing up weekly and no young people, outside help is required. The ability to get this help is complicated by the church’s non-central location. In addition, money is one of the largest problems of the church. The church’s bank account is usually assessed a monthly fee for not meeting the minimum balance requirement, and at most times what is left in the account is on average three dollars. Without a church bus and with very few drivers among the seniors, most of the seniors use Access-A-Ride Vehicles scheduled ahead of time in order to facilitate carpooling. Because of carpooling, seniors consistently arrive late for the start of the service.

Strengths

The food pantry is the major arm of the church and serves as a benevolent role in the community. My objective as the new pastor is to bridge the divide between the younger generation and the senior citizens.

Each year the church celebrates specific annual days that it uses primarily to raise money that goes towards the larger assessments and bills that are due. Some of these annual days are Missionary Day, Men and Women's Day, Ushers Anniversary Day, Steward's Day, and the church's anniversary. At every event, an assessment is expected from the members of the various boards or church members. With no new membership or baptism within the last twenty years, it is the same senior congregants who celebrate these anniversaries. They are assessed an expected amount for that day, in addition to the regular tithes and offerings. Some of these events are per quarter and others are every other month. Because of tradition, no one speaks to the financial burden these seniors are inflicting upon themselves. They relish their annual days for the sake of tradition without counting the actual cost to them and the church. The cost of bringing in a preacher for a morning and afternoon service, plus the expenses used for food and the catering of the service are all overlooked expenses.

Some of the events attract visitors from other churches within the neighborhood who are familiar with the annual celebrations. Those who turn out to the events are also senior citizens likely on their second service for the day who still attend in order to show support for our congregants. Even though these events still garner visitors, it is important to ask whether or not these programs are effective long term. The church should ask: what events need to stay, what ought to be changed, and what needs to end abruptly? Answering these three questions will help determine the next actions of the church. If the church is to grow, sometimes even the most fundamental things that the people hold on to for dear life must be put under the microscope. Doing so will help to determine their importance for the next generation who will occupy the church.

Bethel AME is deeply rooted in the historical origins of the AME church and founding Father Bishop Richard Allen. The church, which recently celebrated its Bicentennial, has seen its expansion to over thirty countries since its inception in Philadelphia in 1787. Founded during the heart of slavery, the church became the choice for slaves who were either rejected by the white church or could not affiliate themselves with the white church.²² Two hundred years is a significant milestone for a denomination that was birthed and operated during the heart of slavery. While the denomination has experienced significant growth over the years, many of the smaller churches in the denomination have had to close. Interestingly, many of the largest AME churches, while maintaining a template of the order of worship, have drifted in a different direction to stay relevant and attract millennials. This is an ongoing concern as some of the AME churches within the Bethel AME district conference are drifting away from the younger generation of AME church goers. Those who remain are the senior members who have been with the denomination for much of their lives. Additionally, in conversations with other AME pastors who are experiencing this fissure in the church, they have noticed that the commitment once displayed by former generations is not held by the younger generations. The assumption is that the younger generations are attracted to the multifaceted ministries and multitude of groups of young people who share similar interests at the larger churches. Their commitment to a church is quite different from that of their parents and grandparents. These AME pastors believe that the churches they pastor must be quicker to see the changes within the communities they are called to shepherd, and see the changes within the hearts of the young people who have become

²² Harry V. Richardson, *Dark Salvation: The Story of Methodism as It Developed among Blacks in America*, C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1976), 50.

disenchanted with the present congregations and are looking to change to churches that are more appealing to their age group.

The younger generation will not stay with a church or congregation simply because it was in their family history. To get a better understanding of this, the Lay Advisory Committee walked the streets and interviewed groups of young passersby to find out whether they went to church or not and what they liked about their present church. The results were astonishing, as many of the answers showed that the younger persons interviewed were not affiliated with a known denomination, but rather a non-denominational church that was very liberal in their worship style. The ones who were in denominational churches had attended that church for an extended amount of time and were often locked into a commitment as a worship leader, choir director, steward, deacon, or advisory board member. Many were also close to the pastor. To leave the church they felt as if they were turning their backs on their pastor whom they knew personally and to whom they believed they were called to assist in the building of the church. Their commitment kept them engaged in the mission and vision of the church and enabled them to see growth in themselves and growth in the church. Many of those interviewed were also attending a church that had a sizable number of younger people actively engaging in activities outside the walls of the church. The youth arranged and led the activities themselves, not wanting to hand over the leadership to someone they felt was out of touch with their age and their reality. In asking about worship style, they preferred an energetic choir with contemporary songs and lyrics that they knew. Their home churches met them where they were in their lives and transitioned them to the next level of change and leadership in the church so that they would use the same strategies in

their secular environment. They created an advantage that will develop them to be winners and achievers in every area of their lives. That is, after all, the purpose of the church, to impact lives for the glory of God.

Our goals should be to experience church with a purpose, with a mission and with a goal of preparing the young generations to be the leaders of the church tomorrow. Since Bethel AME church has no young people in its congregation, it is losing the ability to gain a foothold in the community. The lack of young people, however, is a problem that cannot be ignored. The Lay Advisory came up with a list of areas where the youths of Rockaway and Arverne usually would hang out and to go to these places to meet them. However, in regards to the immediate community surrounding the church, especially with the dominant Caucasian neighbors, the Lay Advisory Committee wanted to know what the neighbors thought of the name of the church and reasons why they never stopped in. They were given the full name of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and asked whether or not they thought the church was an African church. Thirty of the completed questionnaires out of fifty said yes, they thought the church was for Africans or for only black people. This was troubling because it assumed that the church was not for them and that Caucasian residents were not welcome. The youths whom we interviewed considered the church to be for “old people” and did not find it of any interest to attend on any given Sunday of their own will. It became apparent that the task of the church moving forward, should be to reframe the image that the community may have of the church, especially if they thought it was not for them.

During a two-month period, the committee created small postcard bulletins that only showed the church name as Bethel Church without the AME denominational title.

Some of the members of the church questioned why AME was removed, and others did not voice whether they noticed the change. The intention was to see if it would cause a stir internally and if those in the community would be more accepting of simply the church name as Bethel with the photo of the present pastor. After the two-month period, they printed another set of cards and bulletins with the full African Methodist Episcopal church spelled out, and it seemed as if that was the only line that was read by the people reading the card. With this information in mind, the Lay Advisory Committee started to explore secular organizations and their methods of advertising. They read the work of pioneering authors Al Ries and Jack Trout, who argue that “the name is the hook that hangs the brand on the product ladder in the prospect’s mind. In the positioning era, the single most important marketing decision you can make is what to name the product”²³. In the regards to Bethel AME, we needed to take a realistic look at the full name of the church to see if it made sense to completely remove the AME or just not use it in marketing materials. What was learned from the two marketing masters was that it was necessary to create a name that resonated in the hearts and minds of the people of Arverne as a place that they could go and be welcomed in fellowship. To follow up with this strategy, the Lay Advisory Committee listed several churches that were affiliated with a denomination but did not show the affiliation in the church’s name. An example within the AME church is the Greater Allen Cathedral that is also AME, but the AME is not seen in the logo of the church or in the name. The Potter’s House in Dallas is affiliated with the Assemblies of God, but the affiliation is also not seen in their marketing or published materials of the church.

²³ Al Ries and Jack Trout, *Positioning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 71.

The Lay Advisory Committee did notice that, while some of the churches that did not use their affiliation were larger churches, there were also smaller churches that used the word “community” in the verbiage of the church’s name. Examples of these were found in names as Carter Community Church and Springfield Community Church, two progressive and growing churches. Yet, the name challenge was only one small aspect of the methodology and suggested that more had to be unearthed to uncover possible overlooked issues.

Since the inception of the new condominium development, which stretches from Beach 56th street to Beach 79th Street, the condominium board has used the fellowship hall of the church for the residents’ monthly meetings. The community president would donate one hundred dollars to the church for the utilization of the space. As this was only for the residents of the immediate community, no one from the church was invited or found it of any interest to attend these meetings. One could only assume that the decision to not participate in these meetings was not known publicly to the church as only one trustee would open the doors to the condominium board.

The previous serving pastors might not have attended because they assumed that the meeting was strictly for residents and had nothing to do with the church. Interestingly, it was also found that most of the presiding pastors never actually lived in the Rockaways but commuted from either another borough or lived in another part of Queens County. This also made it harder to socialize with the locals, as the pastors had to think of their commute back to their homes, especially during the winter when Arverne’s closeness to the water makes it harder to travel. The distance and the unpredictability of the roadways are important reasons that any senior pastor can give for why they cannot have a deeper

community affiliation. However, the disconnect affects all aspects of the church and its growth, especially when the people are right at the doorsteps of the church, but there is no one there to welcome them. As the new pastor of Bethel AME church, I made it a priority to attend the majority of the meetings with the condominium board in an attempt to build a common place of friendship and inclusion in the resident affairs.

Synergy as a methodology is often overlooked or taken for granted during the process of identifying strategies for obtaining new congregants. Synergy “feels” out the conscious and unconscious interactions between the church and the community. Additionally, synergy defines for us the emotional balance between those who would like to be invited but have never received an invitation and of those who for one reason or another would not step foot into the church. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a message for all those who will hear and receive. At this point in the church’s life, the church needs to think about posterity and how to keep the doors of the church open for future children.

Each time the food pantry is open is an opportunity for the church to implement that synergy and to imagine that anyone of those people in the lines is the future face of the church. The individuals in the line should not be dismissed as irrelevant or regarded as opportunistic because we assume all they want is the food from the pantry. Word of mouth happens to be the most efficient form of advertising for the church. Although it was effective to use word of mouth, as a church, we understood that we had more to do to get the church known.

Bethel AME has a great product that the community can use for the rest of their lives, and that product is the message of Jesus The Christ that can change their lives for

the better forever. Many people obviously have their personal reasons why they do not come to church or why they prefer to shun it altogether. Some stay away because of bad press and past negative experiences that they had or heard about from other people. Some avoid it because it is not a “right fit” for them and they did not feel at home within the church.

While Bethel AME may have scarce resources, it is abundant in one specific area, and that is the area of making first-time guests feel very welcome from the time they enter the church to the time they walk to their cars or other means of transportation. This is the area that the church intends to build upon and reinforce by meeting people in the pantry line on Thursdays, making brief calls on Saturday as a reminder, and welcoming them as they enter the church. The task here provides an infectious presence of family and care. In the summer, every person who enters the sanctuary is given a fan, a napkin, and a small bottle of water. In the winter, someone meets them at the front entrance of the church with hot tea or chocolate and hand warmers with a poncho for their shoulders and body. These minimal efforts go a long way to show comfort and care as visitors on their way out make it their business to say how they felt and to say they will return. One of the stewards of the church places a call mid-week to the visitors to get additional feedback on their experience with the entire service. This strategy is used to get a commitment for another Sunday when they might visit again, especially if they are not members of another church.

Every Sunday data is collected from any visitor who is seated in the sanctuary. While this may be customary for many churches, the Lay Advisory Committee specifically targets visitors who came with children and are not affiliated with another

church. The purpose is to stimulate the imagination and sensitivities of the children by giving them something that they can take home with them. This strategy was taken from fast food stores that have kids' meals equipped with an attractive toy or game that will remind them of their experience. If the children have an interest in coming back, more than likely the parents will want to bring them again. During the follow-up phone calls, the stewards made sure to ask for the children by name and asked permission to put the phone on speaker to speak to the child. The key methodology and strategy is to intrinsically build trust and value starting with first the kids. If the trust is solidified with the children, the parents would feel that they have a community of people who do care for them. Building on Bowen's family theory, it was more critical for the Lay Advisory Committee to think of the whole rather than the pieces that make up the whole.²⁴

There are two divergent approaches that can be taken in looking at the future of Bethel AME church: either the church should fold and close its doors to the community or it should decide that God never intended for this church to close but rather to see the "acres of diamonds" that it are standing within.²⁵ Minus the years the church was closed due to natural and manmade disasters, the church has a wonderful comeback story that many generations of people are willing to become a part of and to share. The Rockaways is a tremendous place of opportunity for evangelism if the people of the church are willing to go beyond the walls of the church and start with the very lines that form every Thursday outside the church. These are the acres of diamonds that the church is standing on. God has given the church a tremendous opportunity to take advantage of them, but its

²⁴ Savage et al., *Narrative Research in Ministry*, 112.

²⁵ Russell H. Conwell and Robert Shackleton, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915). 101.

members must embrace the opportunity and the work that must be done to harvest the hearts of the people that do not know God.

The story of the church is one that has been transparent to first the people of the Rockaway and second to the new incoming neighbors of the Arverne development. The story of the church is authentic and true and one that many will affiliate with once they become acquainted with the story. But if the story is not told, it will remain hidden, and the actual purpose of the church in transforming lives through the work of the Holy Spirit will not be evident. God is forever working, but to see him in the communities where we live and abide, we must become the conduit and means for him to transform lives. The results that Bethel AME has seen and are presently experiencing are not a true reflection of the church's story or of the people. They have the tools for evangelism but have not been told exactly how to use them. They have not been told how to harvest the line that comes to the food pantry. They have not been informed of how to harvest the lives of those who may be looking for direction and are just hoping someone comes along to tell them and show them. With an informed approach to missions and evangelism and the purpose of why it is within the community, the church can begin to affect and develop the lives of those whom it is called to serve. The first place it should start its mission is right in its own food pantry where for all these years, the people have been awaiting someone to tell them about the grace and the love of God.

CHAPTER 3: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

The Book of Acts contains many significant lessons on church growth that the contemporary church of today and Bethel AME can learn from. While the environment of early Christianity was completely different from today in regards to resources and the means by which they spread the information, their impact on community and society endured. Their greatest purpose was to bring glory to God and at the same time cause the movement of the New Testament to change lives forever.

The Lay Advisory Committee made scripture the foundation of its focus, specifically the three pillars of encouragement in Acts 2:47. These bold and upfront pillars stressed that the early church: a) lived a life of praising God; b) had favor with God and the people they interacted with, and c) were blessed by the Lord for their faithfulness by the growth of the church. It was very apparent to the Lay Advisory Committee that Bethel, due to its many years without music and someone to lead active worship, did not know anymore what it means to be in active worship. The concept of worship was in the clapping of their hands, the proclamations of amen, and the reciting of the “call to worship” printed in the weekly bulletin. While the regular members had come to accept this passive style of worship, most of the visitors who may stop in from time to time would conclude that the church is mainly for the elderly and not for younger people. In the heart of Acts 2 rests the very foundation of what most large churches are built upon and that is a committed praise team and a conviction to engage both the people who live

in the community of the church and those who visit. Throughout scriptures, there is a consistent call to address the blind fallacies that cause many to overlook those who are sidelined and marginalized. While our political leaders and community-caring facilities use the media and other means of disseminating information to say that there needs to be a separation between Church and State, it's evident that this political truism obscures the real issue that both the Church and the State need each other.

The call of the individual and the call of the church in the community attest to how these meta-narratives cast a negative look at the church. These narratives suggest different alternatives to God, but in doing so, they endanger future generations of our children who resort to violence over peace. This is very evident in the number of gangs who are recruiting middle and high school students to join their organization, which is often referred to as a "family." Many of these students listen to these narratives of family and feel compelled to join because in order to find the security of family and a better life. It is a sad fact that the gangs do more evangelizing among the youth than the church. What they are not told is about the long terms effects of engaging in crime and how they become the permanent target of law enforcement. A crime statistic report from local Precincts 100 and 101 showed that as of May 2015, shooting incidents had doubled one hundred percent in comparison to other areas of New York.¹ The youth in the gangs were allegedly responsible for the double-digit spike that caused organizations such as the local NAACP and the churches to march silently in the streets protesting the violence. The Lay Advisory Committee, who participated in one community protest march, observed that there were no teenagers or young adults present. This could have been that

¹ Katie Honan, "Rockaway Remains in NYPD's Area of Concern Even as Crime Drops City Wide," *DNA Info*, accessed October 24, 2016, <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20150702/far-rockaway>.

the march was held midweek just after school hours and the kids in the schools or the churches in the neighborhood did not know of the march.

There will always be people within our communities who are facing major health challenges, emotional and financial deprivation, abandonment, homelessness, and spiritual famine. As the presiding pastor of Bethel AME, I reached out to the two captains of the precincts and met with them, along with the local leaders of the NAACP. The meeting was to discuss realistic strategies that Bethel AME could take to help parents and kids who found themselves arrested and in danger of incarceration. The objective was to see if the captains and the local NAACP could form a partnership that would interact with a child before he or she is taken before a judge. The intention of the interception was to let the judge see that the child understood his errors and had supporters who were willing to work with the child for a lesser sentence. Depending on the crime, the strategy was to invoke less time behind bars and get the child involved in more community activities, especially at a church of their choice where they would be under strict supervision. The strategy of “favor with God and Man” was not to be taken for granted. A church like Bethel AME needed strategies that were outside of the normal thinking of a regular church organization. Bethel AME had to find ways that would allow it not to compromise its purpose and values, while still offering the troubled and endangered children of Arverne a choice of belonging to something other than a gang. For that to happen, the church needed to work with the family and criminal courts with the help of the local police department.

Favor with God and Favor with Leaders in Arverne

The Lay Advisory Committee used the “favor concept” to challenge the families of the troubled kids to make church-going a part of their process of change, growth, and development. Even though the focus was on getting more people to come to Bethel AME, it was also important to look beyond the church and allow the parents to choose the church or denomination best suited to their needs. Ultimately human change is more important than simply recruiting people to come to church. The favor concept was rather challenging to maintain as there was not enough manpower to go to the precincts, the various court dates, and meetings with the judges, not to mention the drafting of a critical action plan proposal for the youth. Here again, it was thought that other secular and youth organization may be up to the task of getting involved in the process.

The lack of manpower force me and the Lay Advisory Committee to come up with another alternative, which turned into a unique opportunity. As there were many families who had no time on a Sunday and hardly any time or resources for counseling, the group devised a monthly evening of spiritual formation. Each troubled child and his or her family was offered the opportunity to meet with me once a month for one hour of counseling, prayer, and bible reading. Interestingly, instead of meeting at their homes most of the families opted to do a conference call. As most of the homes were in the projects, it was assumed that the parents were not comfortable inviting me to their homes, especially since they were not members of the church. The conference call option, although effective, also provided a safe distance for parents who did not want to feel too obliged to come to the church.

In the course of three months, four families did the spiritual formation evening where they gained a new perspective on dealing with their children's issues. Although the youth did not indicate why they decided to get involved with the gangs and commit the crimes, the evening meeting did allow them to know that there was somebody at Bethel AME they could start to trust. This in part was the goal I and the Lay Advisory Committee were hoping to attain. We did not take for granted that this was an interaction orchestrated by God for His greater purpose.

During the summer of 2015, Bethel AME attempted—with the help of friends and volunteers—to hold most of its Sunday services either on the beach near the church or on the street directly in front of the church. As the beaches are quite crowded on the weekends, it allowed the visitors to the neighborhood and the residents to become familiar with the church and, most importantly, to bring glory to God.

The first step in transforming Sunday worship was to contact the community affairs officer of the 100th Precinct who informed the pastor and the Lay Advisory Committee that multiple steps had to be taken to complete the process and the weekly event. The first step he mentioned was the biggest challenge for this specific church. The church had to receive signatures from most of the residents living directly in the vicinity of the church. This was a major problem because the church did not have any relationship with the residents surrounding the church. The second step that proved to be an obstacle was having to block off Beach 77th Street, a major one-way street used by most of the residents. The police were not willing to start a public fight on behalf of the church with the Condominium Resident Board Committee responsible for all resident affairs.

In the past, residents have called 911 to complain that the church made too much noise during its Sunday service. The community liaison officer expressed that getting signatures to have the services either on the beach or on the street would likely not garner enough signatures from the residents. Although this was a major setback, especially looking at the additional process of getting permits from the state, the Lay Advisory Committee decided to come up with another strategy to demonstrate the good news of the Gospel. Although the summer outdoor church services did not happen, the setback created a continuous dialogue and relationship between the Bethel AME church and the 100th Precinct to use the church building for activities that involved both the local cops and the community. It was clear that God was indeed creating and establishing a formidable relationship to build His Kingdom and to change lives in the growing relationships between the cops and the local citizens of the church.

The Process of Internal Kenosis at Bethel AME Church

With the Lay Advisory Committee working on the different aspects of creating and generating growth, it became apparent that the church needed to experience a ritual of *kenosis*, which is a spiritual retreat of “emptying, fasting, and sacrificing.”² During the last twenty years of its tumultuous operations, there were no corporate fasts declared in any season of the church year.

The Book of Acts starts with a fundamental and theological discipline of the church that finds the disciples and others in an upper room. This upper room signifies a time of contemplation, meditation, looking back at the past events of the last few days

² Neil Howe and William Strauss, *The Fourth Turning, an American Prophecy* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997). 36.

and perhaps the last three years of their walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. After such a traumatic event as the Christ's crucifixion and his later ascension into the heavens, the apostles needed to contemplate the next phase of their lives by looking internally for answers and transitioning from the previous thought that Christ's death signified the end of their mission. They were not in a place to have all the answers simply because they followed the Lord for a period. It is not a coincidence that The Book of Acts opens with the Lord Jesus giving the disciples instructions not to depart from Jerusalem, "but that they should wait for the promise of the Father."³ In their waiting is a promise to empower them for missions and for greater work within the communities and the farther reaches of the East. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit that they would receive would give them the necessary cultural information to minister to each community they visited as they spread the message of the Gospel.

The awaiting of the Holy Spirit is not an ad hoc experience that the disciples could do or not do. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit was so critical that Jesus in his absence would not allow them to do missions and build his church without them first being empowered. The empowerment hinged on them emptying themselves of the anger, hurt, and pain they had experienced in the last few days of his life. For them to receive more insight, they had to process with heavenly eyes and not their own understanding that everything that had happened was ordained by God and according to his purpose. To understand the plan and purpose of God, they had to re-acquaint themselves with the process of kenosis.

³ Acts 2:4 KJV

One of the greatest examples of kenosis is in Philippians 2:7 in which Paul shows that even Jesus became a servant and was made in the likeness of men. In doing so, he humbled himself to experience the death of the cross⁴. Over human history, numerous cultures have developed specific rituals around ushering in a new cycle or experiencing rites of passages for young men and women.

The chronological events of Acts 1 and 2 outline various steps that the disciplines followed while they were waiting for the pre-ordained promise of Jesus. The disciples had idea what Jesus was referring to when he mentioned being filled with the Holy Ghost or what was going to happen once they received the Promise. What they did know was that things had radically changed since they started following Jesus and since he rose. To assume that they were the same people and had the same type of powers as when Jesus had first commissioned them with the seventy would have been not only foolish but also dangerous and would have led to colossal failure. The process of submitting themselves to God through prayer and supplication was important if they were to receive insight from God that would enable them to impact lives.

The first disciplines they had to implement were the disciplines of prayer and fasting. These disciplines help the church and the individual to look beyond themselves and their wants and needs to what God the Father would like to impart unto them. This project will examine the aspects of kenosis via the disciplines of emptying, fasting, sacrificing, and even scapegoating as it relates to Bethel AME Church.

⁴ Phil 2:7 KJV

Emptying as a Discipline of Kenosis

The life of the Apostles and their walk with the Lord Jesus Christ are vividly described in Luke 5:11 when the disciples with Peter “forsook all and followed him.”⁵ This abandonment of what they knew all their lives to follow someone they believed could forever change their lives came without hesitation and without the need for contemplation. This emptying of their past allowed them to spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically receive of the Lord. To be sure, there could not have been any receiving if they were not willing to leave the fullness of their past experiences and knowledge behind for what they believed was a more promising future ahead with Jesus. Dallas Willard looked at Peter and the disciple's experience in the boat as one that was simply mind-altering and spiritually shaping: “At some point, a certain realization began to grip Peter’s mind. Whose suggestion was this that he had treated so casually? He was literally ‘floored,’ falling to his knees at Jesus’ feet, saying: ‘Oh, sir, please leave us-I’m too much of a sinner for you to have around.’ Luke5:8 (LB).”⁶

In recognizing that Jesus could do the unimaginable, Peter came to the realization that his current life, however comfortable, would not amount to what the Lord Jesus Christ had in store for them. The process of emptying comes with a determined mindset to do something with the “space” that has been emptied. Voids need to be filled, a reality that the Lord Jesus Christ vividly describes in the Gospel of Matthew:

When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, I will return to the house I left. When it arrives,

⁵ Acts 1:8 KJV

⁶ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 228.

it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean, and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.⁷

Once the disciplines had accepted that they would give up their past experiences, they immediately filled the void with the presence of Jesus and the new knowledge they would obtain in their three-year walk with him.

For numerous decades, Bethel AME Church has operated as a church within the neighborhood of Arverne. They got used to conducting church a certain way from week to week and year to year. However, the struggles and the burdens the congregation went through cause them to inherit an abundance of troubles and pains that they held internally against the AME denomination and the unknown people who were moving into the community of the church. The church had reached a crossroad and stayed there, stuck by the perception that no one had taken the time to bring healing, caring, and love to the congregation. They felt more like a parasite than a blessing to the community of Arverne. Eventually, the leadership realized they had to empty themselves of the pain and the anger they had stored up for years because it was hindering their growth. After emptying they saw the need for a time of fasting and prayer to usher in a new, more hopeful era for the church.

Hiring me as the new pastor at Bethel AME was an act by the Presiding Bishop of the First Episcopal District of the New York Conference, “to bring new energy, new insight, and a new spiritual awakening.”⁸ I was briefed that the task to manage and pastor

⁷ Matt. 12:43 NIV

⁸ General Secretary, “African Methodist Episcopal Church.” The AME church denomination consists of conferences and Districts that are presided over by Bishops. In 2015, Bishop Gregory. G.M. Ingram was the Presiding Bishop for the New York Conference.

Bethel AME was not an easy one but one that needed prayer, fasting, and deep insight into the will of God. The present pastor was only the eleventh pastor for the church. The bishop offered other senior pastors the opportunity to pastor the Arverne congregation, but all declined the opportunity because of the rumors and the negative reports coming out of the church. The church was deeply in need of spiritual direction, and fasting and prayer was a biblical place to start.

When the apostles in the Book of Acts became burdened with too many community activities, they decided to designate men to whom the community could call on while they themselves committed their lives to prayer. In Acts 6:3-4, after the disciples had assembled a crowd, they encouraged the community by stating, “Brothers, choose seven men from among who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”⁹

Because of taking up this decisive action, Acts 6:7 shows that the “Word of God spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, even many priests” being added to the church. Two of the major aspects of a church’s mission are its prayer meetings and Bible study meetings. Bethel AME lacked both due to the long commute of the previous pastors who lived outside of the borough of Queens County. I implemented a call-in conference telephone line for the church that would be used for an early morning prayer meeting call that happened every week on Wednesdays at 6:30 a.m. While the church implemented a Bible study on Saturday afternoons, those who turned out were the same members who participated in the early Wednesday call. Additionally, I started a

⁹ Acts 6:3-4 NIV

half-day fast each week on Fridays to help the members focus inwardly on ways to deepen their walk with God. However, the purpose of fasting is not to obtain concrete results or to manipulate God to make things to happen. Quite the contrary, fasting should be to bring the church in humility towards God so that God will look mercifully upon the church.

Fasting as a Discipline of Kenosis

Fasting that helps the church in its humility brings strength to areas of the community in which the church is called to serve. The book of Isaiah gives specific reasons for fasting and both what it should be and what it ought not to be. To paraphrase Isaiah 58, fasting should not be a day when one does as he pleases, exploits his neighbors, and ends in quarreling. Further, one should not outwardly declare to the world that one is fasting. Rather, the fasting that is required of the church shows a distinct service to others via a) loosening the chains of injustice, b) untying the cords of a yoke, c) setting the oppressed free, d) breaking every yoke, e) sharing food with the hungry, f) providing shelter for the homeless, g) clothing the naked, and h) listening to our neighbor when they need us.¹⁰ Every single one of these is oriented towards offering service to others outside of our own comfort zone. In some respects, it may also mean seeking out those not directly in front of us who may need the services. There are specific results that become evident when the Isaiah fast is followed. The answer is seen in the text itself when God lets his children know that in following the fast his way, they were guaranteed to hear from him, and people will become aware of the light of His glory that will shine upon the church. In general, people are attracted to light and God uses the word “light” to

¹⁰ Isa. 58: 6-8 NIV

show that the church becomes visible in the eyes of those who would be looking because the light of His glory would be so apparent. A communal fast calls for the body of the church to come together as one in fasting.

Isaiah 58 lays out the details of a fast, but in looking at the Gospel of Matthew, the Lord Jesus Christ gives specific instructions on whether our fast should be made public or when it needs to take a more private individual approach. Churches are not brick and mortar but rather are the people who live within the communities and live their individual experiences every day. It is because of these various levels of experiences that the Lord Jesus instructs that fasting should not be on public display but rather an intimate and private affair with God, the results of which are determined by God himself. Jesus instructs both the multitude and his disciples by stating:

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face. So that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.¹¹

The importance of a fast from an individual perspective and the communal perspective through the oft-used biblical metaphor of the body. The body of the church comes from within the community, and the people of the community affect the health of the body through their proper attitude towards the fast. There are beneficial results from fasting both as a community and as a sole discipline. Each can bring about a spiritual transformation that causes the blessings of God to shine on his church.

¹¹ Matt. 6:16-18 NIV

Sacrifice as a Discipline of Kenosis

With the word sacrifice comes a long history of negative connotations that cause uneasiness in the church at large and at Bethel AME. It has been determined that much of the uneasiness comes from a lack of thorough understanding of the word itself and how it relates to the church at large and to individuals. When I asked church members to give their interpretation of the word, many simultaneously referred to it as the giving of money and as their obligation to give their tithes and offerings. This mindset contradicts the scriptures in which sacrifices like fasting are both of an implicit nature and an explicit interaction that may involve our own self or things that we own.

Throughout the Old Testament there are many great examples of sacrifice. One of the greatest examples of sacrifice comes when God the father allowed the children of Israel to give their gold, silver, ornaments, and precious stones for the making of objects and utensils that were needed for the tabernacle of God in the wilderness.¹² These offerings of sacrifice were offered with a promise from God that he would dwell amongst them. Over the years, however, sermons on sacrifice have suggested that sacrifice is painful, a misconception that does more harm than good. Such sermons also revolve around, increasing the perception that preachers are simply looking to get more money from their congregants.

If we can shift the perception of sacrifice as something that allows God to dwell even more amid the congregation then the people can be guided to perceive sacrifice as a great thing. Sacrifice at the macro level of the church offers the church the ability to give to God themselves, and through their sacrifice they find that God will bless them and

¹² Exod. 25 NIV

come to dwell in their midst. On the micro level of the individual, sacrifice instills discipline and the ability to remove oneself from the clutter and the many attachments that have filled a congregant's life. The individuals of Bethel AME who live in Far Rockaway are not individuals who have accrued enough wealth to enable them to contribute much. Rather, their giving comes from forming communities in which they may offer food, clothing, and time as means of sacrifice to see that the church is operating and bringing glory to God.

There are also quite a few examples within the context of the ministry of Jesus in which sacrifice as a discipline was evidenced. The story of the widow who gave all she had to the temple treasury reflects the journey and the story of Bethel AME. Jesus, in observing the poor widow, compared her to the rich temple goers. While they only gave a fraction of their wealth, Jesus made it clear that the woman gave all she had. The words of Jesus in Luke 21 resonates not only in history but in today's contemporary times: "All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, but she gave of her poverty put in all she had."¹³ In comparison to other churches in the neighborhood, Bethel AME is not a congregational church with many well-off families, yet each week the consistent and constant outpouring of food from the pantry is a testimony to the generosity of the widow's mite that is much more.

Sacrifice is a discipline that stems from the intrinsic values that make up the individual cognitive view of how they see God and want to offer unto him. Sacrifices are not limited to objects and money but rather also encompass the sacrifice of time. Most

¹³ Luke 21:4 NIV

importantly, individuals should learn the discipline of always asking themselves if God is getting the glory.

Scapegoating as a Discipline of Kenosis

Most church goers understand that prayer and fasting are important disciplines. Not often is the term scapegoating classified as a discipline to be taken up by a church. Yet scapegoating enables the church to come to terms with itself and what it has endured over the years with the goal of making a mindful decision to release those who have hurt the church and instead take the blame. Instead of continuing to look at themselves as “victims” who were taken advantage of by former pastors and elders in authority, they reinterpret the past and say “they were not victims, but volunteers in the matters that caused the church much pain.”¹⁴

The visual image of the scapegoat as shown in Leviticus 16 is a goat that is released to symbolize the removal of past sins and hurts by the people towards God. The same mental and emotional process of release can be achieved by Bethel AME by visualizing a scapegoat running off into the wilderness with all the pain and sins of the church. By releasing what Bethel AME has held for so long, the church can experience the same biblical process of spiritual reformation and transformation that brings the glory back to God.¹⁵

It is one thing to suggest the process of kenosis and its disciplines to a church body, but the church and individuals that make up the whole must want to change and must seek change. The need for change must be voluntary and spiritually needed. The

¹⁴ Howe and Strauss, *The Fourth Turning*, 36.

¹⁵ Lev. 16.10 NIV

Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 5 states vehemently that the blessed consists of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.¹⁶ That hunger and thirst is an ever-evolving process of the church and the individual to want to become more Christ-like.

In the becoming more like Christ, the church takes on the very nature of God to first think of the welfare of others. In its order of worship, each Sunday Bethel AME performs a call and response of the summary of the Decalogue, more commonly known as the Ten Commandments:

And he said to him, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.¹⁷

The weekly recitation of the Decalogue is a reminder to the congregation that as their confessions are made in regards to their love for God the same love ought to be mirrored for each other and for those within the community. The Decalogue calls for a decision that is active in love and suggests how one should go about doing it. Not only is the individual simply reciting the words, but the connection of heart, soul, and mind is the requirement in action committed to the individual in the community. The need for wanting more of God comes also from the need to see people personally come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and personal savior. The witness for Bethel will be using its pantry and the work it does in helping the less fortunate in the community to become aware of a place they can go to get physical food and spiritual food.

¹⁶ Matt. 5:6 NIV

¹⁷ The African American Episcopal Church, "A.M.E.C Bicentennial Hymnal," in *The African Methodist Church Hymnal*, ed. The African Methodist Episcopal Church (Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1986), xvii.

While the pantry is feeding the people in the community who are dependent on the pantry services, the church must be aware that the greater work is to let those who come know that the building houses more than just a food pantry. The work of the pantry ought to move beyond the physical needs to all aspects of the individual. This holistic approach is what Jesus Christ addressed in the feeding of the five thousand in John 6. While Jesus gave the crowd a miraculous meal that nourished their physical being, he realized that they got attached to wanting to follow him because they were fed and not for the spiritual insight he was bringing to them. In this case, Jesus's words to the crowd were not in parables but plain words they could easily understand:

I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him, God the Father has placed his seal of approval.¹⁸

Jesus's admonishment to the crowd was not so much to deter them from following him, but rather to change their perspective to see that he is more than a food provider. In urging them to seek more through him, he was urging them to consider what Dallas Willard refers to as *metanoia*, the process of an inner longing to change¹⁹.

The process of *metanoia* is seen in the urging of Jesus to the crowd to accept his body and blood as everlasting food. In the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus noted that the crowd followed him and had their own agenda of making him a prominent figure in Israel. But the Lord Jesus had his own objective of pleasing God the Father, a goal he made quite plain in John 6: "For I have come down from heaven to do the will of him

¹⁸ John 6:27 NIV

¹⁹ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 227.

who sent me. And this is the of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.”²⁰ What was the response of the crowd to this? They grumbled at Jesus because the two agendas were not the same and they thought that Jesus was one of them because he grew up in their midst. While they listened attentively, they began to understand that Jesus was different and that he wanted them to apply this differentiating factor to themselves in accepting him as one sent from God. Such a transformation outside of their comfort zone was not something they were willing to readily accept.

Metanoia is an inner change that begins with observing that the external things are all limited and there ought to be a more sustaining food that can nourish us. Dallas Willard observed the process of metanoia by looking at how it affects the complete individual mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually in a way that urges the individual to crave change, to crave a longing for the deep disciplines of God. Willard wrote the following concerning the process of metanoia:

We then must change from within. And that is what most of us truly want. The repentance in which we pine for our life and world to be different, the authentic metanoia which Christ opens us to in his gospel (Mark 1:15, 6:12), comes upon us as we are given a vision of the majesty, holiness, and goodness of God. It’s a vision sufficient to impart a vivid realization of our terrible readiness to mistrust God and hurt others and ourselves as we take things into our own hands. This sharp heartbreaking realization of our condition silences all argument and hair splitting rationalization. It makes us simultaneously recoil from God because we realize he also sees us for what we are, and yet we reach out for help and refuge in him²¹.

At some point in the church’s relationship with God, they began to see that there was a fundamental reason why they were located in the community of Arverne. While

²⁰ John 6:39 NIV

²¹ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 227.

there were many churches, the fundamental difference was in the discovery of seeing God anew from the process of kenosis, the cleansing in our walk, and the process of metanoia that urged the church to hunger for a genuine relationship with God the Father. Each of these were critical to the task of strategizing and knowing that the congregant whom we sought was one that Christ had already identified as one of his.

The biblical mandate for Bethel AME was to learn how to reframe the years of their past troubles and allow them to become positive milestones of testimony in the weaving of the tapestry of the church's story. To have a welcoming spirit, the church must understand that everyone who comes is coming with a story of their own. Those who are coming are coming because they need the twin strategies of kenosis and metanoia to meander through their own stories and face life obstacles with integrity and godliness. To accomplish this, they need experienced people who can both explain to them what they are going through and at times even hold their hands as they go through these troubles and burdens.

One possible strategy of identifying congregants for Bethel is making it publicly known within the community that this is a church very familiar with trouble and pain. In becoming transparent with the community and showing how the church implemented workable strategies to overcome those pains and troubles, the church will become much more than a building or an isolated community. People are looking for others who know and can relate to their pain and their story.

The story of Christianity and the astronomical growth of the church came out of immense pain at Calvary on the Cross. The poor and those who were seeking more of God found the opportunity to be filled at the inception of the Gospel that was preached to

them. This new Gospel as preached by the disciples revealed to them a Lord and Savior who was familiar with their pain but who, at the same time, would “not give them more than they can bear.”²² All they had to do was believe and the Lord Jesus Christ would save them and make them completely whole.

The modern church of today is not preaching a new gospel. It is the same gospel that the disciples had originally spoken that brings transformational change for the individual who, in turn, changes a community. After all, the community is made up of individuals and once the individuals are changed, the community changes as well. The key to identifying strategies for church growth is the ability to see the face of Jesus on every individual who has the potential to be converted and to come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior.

The responsibility of Bethel AME towards the community of Arverne is to find the people within the community who are hurting because of personal trauma, personal loss in the family, and other losses that may be overwhelming. Other acts of missions may include but are not limited to reaching out to local hospitals, hospices, and those who may be suffering from sickness and severe pain in their homes.

In Matthew 4 at the very outset of the ministry of Jesus, the scriptures highlighted that Jesus preached to, taught, and healed the sickness of everyone he could. Having completed a time of spiritual formation and transformation, Bethel AME would be equipped to go out and minister within these three areas. While it would be phenomenal for the church to see and experience actual physical healing, we should not forget that healing comes in many forms. Much of the congregants need spiritual, mental, and

²² 1Corinthians 10:13 KJV

emotional healing. While much of the focus is on the physical due to the age of our members, these three areas of healing can dramatically alter the direction of the church by providing a more holistic approach to healing.

The church has a large list of congregants who are sick and unable to attend the regular church service. Equipping the leaders with the mandate to go spread the gospel already given by the Lord Jesus Christ empowers them to know that further permission is not needed to spread the Good News of the Gospel. Previously, this empowerment was lacking in Bethel AME simply because the congregants were not fully taught in the word and did not study it enough on their own to understand it. Many congregants do not spend personal time in the Word of God. What is more, most of those who attend church are of the mindset that missions, visiting the sick, praying for those who need prayer, and going out to be witnesses of the Gospel are jobs and tasks better done by the pastor of the church. This hands-off paradigm to ministering has shaped the church over many years.

The lack of conversions on a regular basis takes away from the joy a church or Bethel could experience as a congregation. This is a compounding spiritual problem. The lack of witnessing leads to lack of conversions; the lack of conversions leads to a lack of baptisms which leads to a lack of memberships and thus to a lack of church growth. The key for Bethel is to increase the number of regular conversions.

The Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 brings many lessons for Bethel AME. One of those lessons is to seek the right time for the masses to hear the word. There are many shopping places in the Arverne community at which Bethel and its congregants could set up a table on a regular basis to interact with shoppers. The objective is not to focus on

numbers and how many people to target but rather the quality of the message that the church is sending so that the hearers can connect and listen.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter the apostle responded to those who thought the excitement of the disciples was due to alcohol. His response was uniquely alluring and knowledgeable of the scriptures for someone who three years before was simply a fisherman. His method of speaking and engaging those who listened appealed to both their hearts and minds and captivated them to the point that—in a short speech explicating the scriptures—three thousand people were converted. What was different about Paul’s approach than our approach today at Bethel AME? Why are the numbers of converts significantly less today than on that day? Peter, after all, spoke from the pain, the hurt, the disappointments, and the conviction of which he now accepted and believed. He too had his own spiritual downfall and awakening that made him see God in a new transformative way. No wonder the Lord Jesus Christ had forewarned him that he would fall and that the Devil would take control of his life, but after his conversion, he strengthened his brethren.²³

The key concept in Peter’s walk was that he was converted and he did indeed strengthen his brethren. Bethel AME can take Peter’s story and fashion it as their own to strengthen the weak and those who desperately need help. People are not being converted in Bethel AME because the church is not going out to where the people are in the pantry lines at the front of the church, in the homes of those in the community, and in the public spaces of the neighborhood where people spend their time.

²³ Luke 22:31 NIV

The spreading of the Gospel is very easy and even the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated it to his disciples when he met the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus simply addressed her need, saw an opportunity where he could minister, and then filled that need. The woman then turned around and spread the good news on a larger scale in the community, telling them that Jesus must be the Christ²⁴.

Bethel's stance is the same as the Samaritan woman, Peter, and many others who bore witness to the change God made in their lives, even at the point when it seemed as if all else had failed. The church has lasted for ninety-six years by the grace of God and there is no telling what God the Father is looking to do through this church in the future.

²⁴ John 4:28 NIV

CHAPTER 4: PANTRY DAY IMPLEMENTATION

The Lay Advisory Committee suggested that Bethel AME, for one week only, change the time of the pantry from Thursday to Saturday. The purpose of this was to have a church service before the pantry opened and the pantry goers received their weekly food bags. Prior to handing out the bags, the attendees who were already lined up were given tickets and encouraged to be seated in the sanctuary to receive prayer and encouragement. Having a ticket solidified their place in line and reassured them that they would not lose their place in line. This change of the pantry hours and day was officially coined “Pantry Day.”

Publicizing Pantry Day and the Bethel AME Church in the Far Rockaway, Arverne community took much a lot of work and dedicated hours of effect. Part of the process of moving the time of the pantry was to make sure that the incorporation of a preceding church service would not conflict with New York State rules. Communication was an integral part of the entire legal and spiritual aspect of that day. Church members had to make crystal clear to the people who were lined up that their attendance at the church service was not a prerequisite to receiving the food. The challenge, in the preliminary planning for Pantry Day, was finding the right language to use to invite the people to the sanctuary without them feeling as if they were forced to attend church. Because most of the people who would come on Saturday would be the same crowd from Thursday, the timing and length of the service was also a consideration. The Lay

Advisory Committee discussed at length both the language used in the communication and the length of the service.

After much discussion, it was unanimously agreed upon that the service would be held for one hour prior to opening the doors of the pantry. The food bags of those who attended the service and were seated in the sanctuary would be brought upstairs to them after the service. In the discussion of the hour-long service, the Lay Advisory Committee agreed that Pantry Day should follow a non-traditional AME service. This non-traditional AME service would not incorporate the regular Sunday order of the “call to worship” or the ritualistic repetitions with which the pantry attenders might not be familiar. Rather, they agreed that the service would be made up of contemporary songs regularly played on Christian radio and selected prayers from members of the church. In the drafting of the service, the Lay Advisory Committee sought the opinion of the leaders of the church who suggested that they thought it best to invite local politicians to speak for a moment. While this was not a popular concession, committee members agreed that it would allow politicians to see the work of the church in helping the neighborhood.

The committee called three local politicians to inquire about their availability during Pantry Day. Donovan Richards, a council member that counts Far Rockaway among his districts, confirmed that he would be able to make it to the event.¹ To drum up additional publicity for the event, a colorful, half-page advertisement for the event was placed in the local newspapers each week during the month of February until the week of Pantry Day on March 16, 2016.

¹ Council Member Donovan Richards represents the 31st District of the New York City Council.

The committee set an advertising budget of eighty dollars that they used from the middle of January to the actual date of Pantry Day. While the local newspaper, specifically *The Wave* in Far Rockaway, ran the date of Pantry Day each week, the Lay Advisory Committee thought it best to use social media to advertise the event cheaply on Facebook. On Facebook, the marketing campaign reached an average of three to four thousand residents in the chosen demographic group of thirty-five to fifty-five-year-old residents.

In the month of January, two months prior to Pantry Day, a sign with the church's name and a photo of the pastor was placed at the front of the exterior church wall. This was the first time in over twenty-five years the church had a sign of any kind depicting to the community the church's name, the service time, and the name of the pastor. Possibly the previous pastors and church leadership assumed that the community automatically knew the name of the church and times of the service. The committee found it quite hard to understand why the church had never invested in a metal sign showing the name of the church or even its address.

The Lay Advisory Committee and I wanted to be able to track the results of the advertisements placed on Facebook and *The Wave* and from any new person who attended the church because of the new sign. To implement this, we created small cards on which visitors could indicate by what means they came to know of the church. The card listed all the various channels that were taken to publicize the church, and visitors were asked to place the card in the offering plate at the time of giving. During the months of January and February, we collected a total of forty cards that showed that the signage had the biggest impact on increased church attendance. Pantry visitors saw the sign while

collecting their food bags. This was a significant pre-Pantry Day breakthrough as it had previously been taken for granted that people knew the pertinent information about the church.

Armed with the new information that the church needed much more exposure, we organized a mission committee to sit in front of the community Stop & Shop every Saturday to share information about the church. The Stop & Shop supermarket was within three blocks of the church, and it was quite alarming to the committee that those who were given small cards with the church's information had no clue the church was even open. Those who were willing to take the information from the missions group also received information on the upcoming Pantry Day and the church's time of service.

Within the community of Arverne, there are three housing projects that range from Beach 50th Street to Beach 86th Street. Many of the members and visitors of both the church and the food pantry live within one of these housing projects. We asked the members of the church who lived in any of these housing projects to post the information about Pantry Day in the lobby of the building on the community announcement board for residents to view.

One of the critical aspects of the Bethel AME outreach plan for Pantry Day was the building of the relationship with the other seven churches within its community. The committee emailed and sent via postal mail information concerning Pantry Day to each of the churches and their pastor. They were invited to contact me to solidify a relationship and to be participants in the Pantry Day program. Even though the mailings went out a month ahead, they did not produce any notable responses from the churches or their pastors, except for one from the Macedonia Baptist Church ten blocks away. The pastor

sent his desire to be present for Pantry Day, even though he had other engagements. Despite being unable to attend, he made mention of the Pantry Day in his church bulletin weekly up to the date.

The Lay Advisory Committee was hopeful to hear back from the other neighboring churches, but the lack of response did not dampen the spirit for Pantry Day. The negative response was simply a feedback moment that made the volunteers for Pantry Day re-assess their roles and expand what they were comfortable doing on the day. Instead of using pastors to pray or give encouragement, the roles were now assigned to volunteers and members of the leadership team.

Since the committee selected March 26th as Pantry Day and preparation did not start until January, the task at first seemed quite daunting. Every Thursday, members of the Lay Advisory Committee who were available to be at the pantry during its regular hours, volunteered in the pantry and practiced inviting those in the line to both the upcoming Pantry Day and to a church service on a Sunday. Making the time to come to the pantry on Thursday reduced their fear of rejection and gave them tactics to deal with those who reacted negatively to being invited to church. The eight weeks of visiting the pantry created a common bond between the volunteers and the recipients of the food bags. Conversations became easy as both volunteers and recipients entertained possibilities of when they could be contacted to come to a church service on a Sunday.

The opportunity to volunteer at the pantry and dialogue with people about how open they were about church attendance presented another grand opportunity for church growth. Instead of leaving it up to the people to take the actions, the volunteers presented them with the option of four Sundays and asked them to make pick a time on a Sunday

when they preferred to be called. In gathering their emails, telephone numbers, and addresses right in the pantry, it was a clear sign they were interested. At the end of the month of January, committee members called fifteen individuals to remind them to attend church on the first Sunday in February. Out of the fifteen who were interested, five showed up on the first Sunday. This was a thirty-three percent success rate that led to five more in church attendance that first Sunday in February.

During the month of February, the Lay Advisory Committee focused on preparation and effective planning for Pantry Day. One of the greatest assets came from the local postal office that offered a list of names and addresses of the residents of Arverne for a minimal cost. To test the response returns of the mailings, the committee mailed two hundred postal cards with a picture of the church on the front and a description of upcoming events in March on the back. As Pantry Day was only a month away, a real assessment of the results of the mailing could not be determined. The most effective means of communicating the information for Pantry Day was word of mouth by the congregants and the volunteers. Each person involved had to take ownership of the day and its importance to the community and to the publicity of the church.

In the two-week period prior to Pantry Day, the Lay Advisory Committee appealed to two local radio stations to announce the event at least twice per day. The reason for the extra push was mainly centered on the two hundred bags of food that had to be given out. It was understood that the approximately one hundred and eighty regulars from the food pantry would come. Volunteers made a separate set of bags for the regulars and another set of bags for those who were new and visiting for just Pantry Day.

Having two separate bags of food on Pantry Day allowed the volunteers to give the appropriate reading materials about the church and its services to those who were coming to the church and the pantry for the first time. The regular volunteers of the food pantry and the volunteers for Pantry Day combined their efforts to create a total of three hundred and eighty bags. As the bags contained no perishable foods, the bags could be prepared at least two weeks prior to Pantry Day. Most of the necessary efforts were the proper gathering of personal information from all the attendees, even from those who were considered regulars. Training had to be centered around the welcoming of the guests and learning to use the trained language of inviting the attendees into the sanctuary who came just for the food.

The week prior to Pantry Day, volunteers placed signs with the name of the church at both intersections of Beach 77th Street where the church is located. These signs which were in bold letters and easily visible also stated the church address and “Pantry Day March 26, 2016.” The committee hoped these signs would lead some drivers to inquire for more information about Pantry Day, or simply to ask for directions to the church. In its ninety-six-year history, Bethel AME church members have never jointly worn church-themed t-shirts that reflected their cause. To bring uniformity to the workers and the volunteers, we ordered one hundred black t-shirts with Bethel AME in all caps on the front of the shirt and the address of the church on the back. As the shirts were given out to the leaders and the members to wear on Pantry Day, there was a palpable sense of pride among the volunteers. We put the extra t-shirts for sale, and the members quickly made purchases for their extended family members and children who intended to attend Pantry Day. Although the day itself had not quite arrived yet, the atmosphere surrounding

the upcoming day among the church and its members, including the Lay Advisory Committee, was honor and pride at seeing their hard work come to life.

Pantry Day March 26, 2016

The long-anticipated morning of Pantry Day came with excitement among the members who volunteered and the Lay Advisory Committee. Although Pantry Day was scheduled to start at 10 a.m., everyone was asked to show up two hours before the church would open its doors. With the change of the regular pantry day from Thursday to now Saturday, the lines for the pantry were expected to form quite early. In arriving at the church at 7:30 a.m., the Lay Advisory Committee was taken aback to see that there were a significant number of people already at the front of the church. They had arrived three hours early hoping to avoid the anticipated rush. We made the decision not to invite anyone into the church yet, since the volunteers and those who would be working alongside the Lay Advisory Committee had not convened to pray and discuss the plans for the day. Most of the volunteers had until 8:30 a.m. to arrive at the church before a full meeting and huddle. At the time of the first meeting of the day, everyone was dressed in the black Bethel AME t-shirts. Families who came to volunteer brought their children proudly wearing the shirts.

Pantry Day was six months in the making and required time, resources, and the organized implementation of the church's talents, skills, and abilities. It was the day when Bethel AME had an opportunity to be re-introduced to the community it was called to serve. It was also the day the community and the people who often frequented the food pantry would see the building as more than a place they could get a weekly bag of food; it was a ministry where their entire family could grow. The task of the volunteers and the

members who had gathered to offer their assistance was to make Pantry Day an annual communal event.

A total of fifteen volunteers and children came to help and assist with Pantry Day. Based on their skill sets, the volunteers were broken up into groups of three and placed at designated locations inside and outside the church where they would have the most impact. Due to the number of people expected to fill the lines and an expected crowd way over the two hundred mark, the committee placed three groups of individuals outside to both monitor and engage those in line. Those engaging the line were specifically asked not to proselytize to anyone but to simply be assuring and friendly with the objective of relaxing those in line. The key objective in doing this was to prevent anyone in the line from becoming agitated or influencing others who were listening. Additionally, by engaging the line with meaningful and friendly conversations, these volunteers could also ease the process of obtaining information from those who had attended the event. It was rather critical that anyone who received a bag that day gave their contact information, including name, address, and telephone. While it was hoped that more information could be attained—such as who else lived in the home, whether it be siblings, adults, and children—this information was not as critical as the basic information.

A total of ten children volunteers were directly assigned to pass out the food bags. This strategy was employed so that parents would see the engagement and the involvement of the children and would inquire about bringing their children to the church. The children were fully on board with what they had to do and were prepped to say, “Welcome to Bethel. We hope to see you again.” We hoped that their child-like enthusiasm in saying the phrase would emotionally connect with those who received their

bags. These children were between the ages of eight years old to no older than twelve years old. The regular workers of the pantry were asked to simply monitor the children and assist when needed, especially if they saw the children getting distracted.

Delegating volunteers to be on hand as spiritual coaches was key to the start of Pantry Day. Many of the people who come to the food pantry find themselves marginalized due to unemployment, and living on minimal resources and little sustenance. Many of them are renting rooms from families and friends or renting from strangers. Others who have an apartment in the housing projects are living in an apartment with numerous friends and family that exceed the living capacity of the apartment. A one bedroom apartment sometimes houses at least ten individuals. For these disadvantaged individuals in Far Rockaway and Arverne, the Bethel food pantry is a life source. Alternatives sources of food are closed to them because they do not have the money to go to the regular Stop & Shop or the other larger supermarkets in the neighborhood. Interestingly, the city approved the construction of these large supermarkets for the residents of Arverne By the Sea condominium whose economic lifestyle exceeds those coming to the pantry. With the Bethel AME food pantry serving as a life source of hope for the less privileged and a scorn to those of adequate wealth, the significance and intended purpose of Pantry Day was to help bridge the gap that exists in this small ethnically-divided neighborhood. It was for this reason that the volunteers for Pantry Day came from a variety of ethnic background. The volunteers were Caucasian, Filipino, Indian, African American, Hispanic, and Caribbean. Except for the African American members and the leaders of the church who desired to grow Bethel AME, the

only concern of the rest of the volunteers was to see that God was glorified that day in the community.

Pantry Day started at 9 a.m. on March 26, 2016, in the community of Arverne. Volunteers were sent to each end of Beach 77th Street to invite passersby and drivers to attend the church event. The boldness of the printed name of the church on the black background of the tee shirts was the first thing onlookers would see as they were approached by the volunteers. The one hour service consisted of two gospel artist groups who volunteered their time for Pantry Day. At first count, I greeted a crowd of over sixty individuals who gathered in the sanctuary. The four gospel songs sung by the artists were two well-known hymns and two contemporary songs. After each song selection, one of the leaders offered specific prayers. One prayed for local political leaders, the churches, and their pastors. Others prayed for the neighborhood gangs, for Saint John Hospital, the only hospital in the neighborhood, and for the food pantry in its service to the community. These prayers lasted a maximum of two minutes. Surprisingly, mid-way through the service, the sanctuary was filled with people from the line who had come in for prayers and to hear me speak. Instead of a sermon, I have words of encouragement and stressed the importance of having community solidarity. Smiles beamed on the faces in the sanctuary as the leaders introduced themselves to the people of the community. At the end of the service, everyone in the sanctuary was encouraged to fill out the information card and to wait for their food bags that they would receive in the sanctuary. This announcement came as a shock as the people were getting ready to go back downstairs to show their numbers to obtain their bags.

The events of Pantry Day not only included having a church service and giving away bags of food; they included a catered lunch for attendees to eat while they mingled and conversed with each other. The abundant food and snacks allowed time for me to move from one individual to the next, interacting with the people of the neighborhood. Within the first two hours of Pantry day, we had already handed out the two hundred bags specifically packed for those who were visiting the pantry and the church for the first time. While this was good, others who inquired for the bags mentioned that they were overlooked and never got a bag. In a last-minute double checking, it was found that the volunteers had only packed three hundred bags, and many of those bags intended for new visitors were mixed up and went to the regular weekly people of the pantry. While it produced some initial chaos, we asked those who did not receive a bag to come the following Thursday to obtain two bags. As the inventory of the pantry had not been established for the week, the director of the pantry recommended that the Lay Advisory Committee and I not pack new bags to simply quell an argument. The inventory of the pantry needed to be fully reconciled before giving away any food to ensure proper record keeping to keep New York State guidelines.

Beginning at 3 p.m., during the last hour of Pantry Day, the street team came back to the church with two individuals who wanted to surrender their hearts to Christ. All the volunteers and the leaders rejoiced, thrilled that Pantry Day gave them a soul winning opportunity. Interestingly, as the spiritual coaches prayed for these two individuals and gave them more information, many of the residents of the Arverne by the Sea condominium development stopped in to have conversations.

This provided a long-awaited opportunity to meet the neighbors who lived immediately in the surrounding of the church. Many of the condo residents did not know what the inside of Bethel AME looked like, especially after the destruction of Hurricane Sandy. They were given tours of the church sanctuary and the back of the church that provided details of the church's history and its many encounters over its many years.

As the commingling of the neighbors took place, many of the residents expressed interest in taking an active step towards coming to the church. They were rather surprised to learn that the church was not for "Africans" but rather was a church of African descendants. Socializing in the fellowship hall of the church was not an activity that was very common in the church or in the history of the church. This is especially true after experiencing the impact of two severe hurricanes that left the fellowship hall in a less than desirable state. With over two hundred people throughout the building it was hard to tell that this was the same church which had experienced such immense disasters. In all possible views, Pantry Day was the proudest moment for the Bethel AME church family in years, as those from every race, age, and gender meet under one roof and shared the church's historic moment.

In the final moments of Pantry day when we collected all the two hundred and fifty information cards, we considered this an appropriate moment to end the day and rejoice. However, at this time five young people came in with the street team volunteers wishing to surrender their hearts to the Lord. This presented a total of seven souls saved because of Pantry Day—significantly more than the church had seen in the last twenty years.

The seven individuals who responded to the message of the Gospel with the street team evangelizers were residents of the Arverne community. They also disclosed to the Lay Advisory Committee and the volunteers that even though they were heavily involved in local gang activities, they were always looking for a way out. The information card showed that none of the seven individuals attended any of the churches in the neighborhood and had limited schooling. What was evidenced in these individuals was indeed a cry for help and a cry that was overlooked or rejected previously by those who saw them.

After carefully listening and giving each of the individuals time to speak and disclose their needs and concerns, a couple of adolescents and mature individuals shared that they were parents who still lived at home with their families. They communicated that they chose to be with a gang because the gang provided for them without judgment. When asked about their church relations, the reactions were quite adverse. They believed that the churches in the Rockaways were special clubs that were only for those who said they were saved and that these clubs were afraid of the young people in the streets. In our inquiries into how the church could assist these young people, we discovered that their parents were members of a local church in the neighborhood. They objected to the example that their parents showed because of the turmoil in the house.

They were looking for other young people who exemplified truth and genuinely believed that God could help them. It was seeing the young volunteers in the street with the t-shirts that made them stop and have a conversation that change their lives. These spontaneous conversations with these young people clarified what it takes for church growth and how to identify a future congregant. Even though Bethel AME and other

churches did not know it yet, the young people outside of the churches knew what we in the community of Arverne had been overlooking: that in the identifying a future congregant, there are no ideal faces, not set ages or ethnicities that qualifies a person for salvation or for Bethel AME. A congregant is anyone who is willing to hear the message of Jesus Christ and personally decide that the message applies to their life enough to become a part of a church family.

This discovery by the Lay Advisory Committee on Pantry Day made it possible for me, the church leaders, and the volunteers to see that Bethel AME church had to become a different church. Historically, the church was considered a church for “blacks or African Americans” in the community. Now the church had to become a church that met and addressed anyone in the streets of the community to whom the Gospel appealed. The volunteers met the seven young people who dedicated their lives to God on Rockaway Boulevard, the main street in the community. They did not seek the church on their own or expect to give their lives to Christ. Rather, our volunteers were approached them respectfully and listened to them. This made the young people receptive to the message and to the young volunteers who brought them the message.

When Pantry Day finished at 6 p.m. on March 26, 2016, it became an iconic day in the history of the church. From the early hours when there were already people in line to later in the day when numerous people came to hear about the history of the church, to the eventual handing out of the many food bags, the day was an unmitigated success. However, the greater success was due to the volunteers who walked the streets and could minister to seven individuals who were willing to become a part of the church. There was no doubt in the minds of all the leaders and volunteers that God was indeed glorified.

We learned immense lessons at the hands of the seven individuals, lessons that would shape the missiology, the philosophy, and the spiritual maturity of Bethel AME. These lessons made it clear that the church had to go out in the streets and boulevards and also speak with the people in the pantry line if we wanted to see the church grow. While the rejoicing of the souls saved was in all aspects a matter of surprise and an unexpected outcome, it left us wondering how many people had already passed the church in the last few years and decades, hoping that someone within the walls of the church would approach them.

We had a sinking feeling that perhaps many had been overlooked, especially among those who came to the pantry, because we lacked the courage to approach them. On Pantry Day, people traded many stories with me, the leaders, the volunteers, the children, and the Lay Advisory Committee. One of the most poignant stories was from a weekly attendee of the food pantry who disclosed that she failed to come to church because she had no church shoes. She disclosed to me privately that she was ashamed that did not have the money to purchase what she considered proper church shoes. I told her to come in her sneakers and even her dressed-down clothing. While it was heartbreaking, it shined a light on the critical importance of the food pantry in the community of Arverne.

In our late debriefing after Pantry Day, all the volunteers and the Lay Advisory Committee confessed that Pantry Day had not only impacted their current lives but changed them forever. They now understood why people came to the food pantry and were able to see the pantry as a life saver in the community. It was not that the people were avoiding the church or wanting to attend the church. It was because they were not

invited or they felt ashamed to come. It was this inadequacy that showed up in their lives and in the consistent struggles they faced as a community because no one was showing them that there was a better way to do things or go about life. It was time for Bethel AME Church to wake up and become the lighthouse in a community that was overshadowed by the darkness of gangs and violence. We needed to become the voice that speaks the truth.

The congregants who the church sought were all around them but the people on the outside needed someone to interpret the message of hope they were hearing. When a message of doom and despair is communicated for a length of time, it becomes the norm. Then when the message of hope is introduced, the listeners are skeptical and need direction on how to interpret the good news. The task of the church is to clarify the message that is preached so that all who hear it will be able to identify with the message.

CHAPTER 5: PROJECT EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Both the Lay Advisory Committee and I as the pastor of Bethel AME later evaluated the project. In hindsight, we unanimously agreed that the project implementation on Pantry Day did bring glory to God. Yet, the requirements of the project itself demanded a lot of time and sacrifice by all persons involved, especially because of the distance of the volunteers' residents from the church.

One of the specific problems had to do with scheduling because neither I nor any of the Lay Advisory Committee members lived close to the church. Each of the selected individuals lived in various parts of New York and Long Island, which made everyone's commute to and from the church over an hour. Since each of the individuals were also intensely involved in their own churches, scheduling was a frustrating stumbling block during the planning of the project.

Rescheduling and cancellations happened frequently within the first three months of the assembling of the Lay Advisory Committee. Coming up with a mutual time to meet, pray, and discuss the objectives of the project and the church seemed quite daunting. The new pastor of Bethel AME since June 2015, I intended to start the project in October 2015. Prior to my appointment, pastors had only been assigned to Bethel AME for an average of eight months. This meant that rarely did the pastors get to know the local community. Before Pantry Day, I needed the time to become familiar with the landscape and help heal a broken church. When I arrived at Bethel AME, it was clear that

the scope of the work that needed to be done for the project was large and time consuming.

On the days that the Lay Advisory Committee found it problematic to meet, especially in the snow ridden months of December and January, we set up a conference call number with a call-in code. As a group, we had planned to call in every Thursday evening for a moment of prayer and reflection and then to discuss the project and designate roles and tasks. Many times I had to wait at least thirty minutes for others to come on the conference call. It was only as the weeks started to progress and the urgency of the meeting was communicated that an effort was made to come on the call on time.

The organization of the Lay Advisory Committee was another unexpected challenge. I first sought team members who were not common church goers and who wanted to design a church that they would go to. The first Lay Advisory Committee consisted of ten members whose background varied from marketing in secular organizations, bankers, and corporate leaders. I had chosen not to involve any of the members or leaders of the church, since I found their views of church growth unprogressive. However, when I was consistently waiting every Thursday for my first chosen Lay Advisory Committee to come on the call and pray, it became clear to me that some members were uncomfortable with the process of prayer. Through this, God showed me that I had to use the people I already had regardless of my personal challenges with them. In my immaturity, having only been the pastor for five months, I thought that by choosing non-church goers that it would allow me to see the church from the outside in, instead of from the inside out. Not only did this prove to be a fallacy, but it highlighted my lack of spiritual management and understanding of church leaders,

seniors, and church culture. After careful prayer and consideration, I disbanded the first Lay Advisory Committee of ten members during December 2015 and created a new Lay Advisory Committee in the same month. This new group consisted of a total of eight members, including leaders from the food pantry, the secretary of the church, and others who were members of other churches.

The process of creating Pantry Day had a spiritual, emotional, and even financial impact on the leaders of the church and the Lay Advisory Committee. As the budget of the church was very small, the option of using the tithes and offerings to pay for postcards, marketing materials, name lists, and gas were not an option. Literally, all the monies that went towards materials for the pantry were from the pockets of those who volunteered. The volunteers and the Lay Advisory Committee who did not live in the Rockaways had to contend with pay tolls to and from the church. Therefore, trips to the church were kept at a minimum of four times per month. To minimize their commute and costs, we choose other locations such as a neighborhood restaurant in Brooklyn to relax while working.

On all fronts, the attempt to get all of the committee together in one place was met with consistent resistance. Since some of the members of the Lay Advisory Committee were from different churches outside of Arverne, they were asked to volunteer to come to Bethel AME for two Sundays per month. This presented a challenge because of their commitment to their home churches and caused some strife with their home pastors who objected to them having to attend at all. When the individuals and the volunteers showed up, it was because they had either attended an earlier service at their church or because their pastor was preaching elsewhere that Sunday.

It was after contacting *The Wave*, a local newspaper in Rockaway, for a price quote for a small advertisement that a little light started to shine through the darkness of the project. *The Wave* does not charge local churches who perform community work for advertisements. Since Bethel AME was performing a weekly community benevolence, we inquired and pushed to see if they would run a full-page advertisement until Pantry Day, a request they gladly accepted. Additionally, since I was the new pastor of Bethel AME, they wanted to interview me about my experience and background and introduce me to the community of Arverne and Far Rockaway. This blessing made it abundantly clear that God was giving us access to the community.

The Lay Advisory Committee hoped that the great opportunity of free placement in the local newspaper would generate a buzz that the church was open and that perhaps by the second Sunday in January, there would be noticeable difference in church attendance. Prior to Pantry Day, only ten to twelve senior members regularly showed up. These members were the leaders who were also the trustees and the stewards of the church. During the service, my view from the pulpit was very discouraging as most the members seemed to either be falling asleep or dazed with blank stares on their faces. The Lay Advisory Committee members who came to participate in the service found this very discouraging and wanted to opt out of the project altogether. This discouragement continued through the month of January and led two of the Lay Advisory members to resign, since they found the congregants and the church itself “on the way to the grave.” This led me and the remaining members of the committee to struggle with feelings of hopelessness, as we wondered if it was possible at all for this church to have a chance at a new life.

The senior members of the church who make up the majority and who also make up the leadership of the church objected to any change or introduction into the worship service. “No” and “we cannot afford” were two things that I heard a lot from existing leadership. They had been happy with the previous pastor who played music from his cell phone. Having a worship leader or musicians was not a high priority for them. As far as they were concerned, they did extremely well without musicians or a worship leader for years and saw no problem with the way the church worshipped. In their debriefs with me, the Lay Advisory Committee mentioned how discouraging these continuous objections were.

The Lay Advisory Committee asked themselves, how do we grow a church when its members do not want to grow? They broached this discouraging challenge with the district supervisor of the church conference. We wanted to know why the church was kept open since it did not make economic sense for it to remain open. We discovered that, despite the church having its internal and external challenges, it was kept open because it met its financial obligations with the AME denomination. This was personally discouraging and upsetting for all the Lay Advisory Committee because there were no checks and balances in place for the spiritual maturity of the church.

It was hard to understand why the church was still in operation when no one had been saved or baptized for years. Additionally, there were no marriages or new members in the last ten to fifteen years. Incredibly enough, no one asked questions about shortcomings or about whether or not the church was moving in the right direction. Many times, when we held meetings with the leaders of the church to learn about the history of the church and to let them know of our progress, we were met with disdain and contempt.

There were no signs that encouraged us to continue, even when encouragement came from external sources, to love the people of the church. This was incredibly hard to process, especially because the help that was offered was for the growth of the church.

One of the pivotal moments of the project was when we were able to show the church that their long disdain for the people who worked in the food pantry was incorrect and immoral because they did not show the love of Christ. What is more, it was downright immoral of them to say that the pantry did not bring any money to the church. This exposed how the leaders of the church did not see the spiritual and charitable value of the pantry, in large part because those who came and received the food never came to a church service. To combat these behaviors, the Lay Advisory Committee began a series of five-minute spiritual formation sessions at the start of each meeting. Leaders of the church led these sessions and shared scripture and expressed three grateful thoughts. One of the three had to be about the pantry or the church. Interestingly, by continuously expressing a grateful thought about the church or the food pantry, their negative perspective began to change to a more positive one.

Many times it looked like the project was never going to make it, in large part because members of the Lay Advisory Committee and volunteers could not agree. Few consistently complained that other colleagues were disorganized and did not work within the plan, even when it required impromptu thinking and actions. A few times, members of the Lay Advisory Committee left the meetings because they felt that another colleague did not respect them. Sadly enough, trying to resolve those high-tension meetings through prayer did not work. At that time we felt prayer did not work because of the consistent high tensions in the meetings which were resolved much later. Over the course of the

project, as the pastor of the church and as the chief advisor of the project, many times I had to apologize to committee members for something that happened in a previous meeting.

In these tense times, everyone needed to be reminded of the purpose of the project and that we were doing this as participants in building the Kingdom of Heaven and not for selfish motives. Consistent coaching and reminding had to be done to simply see that the project would materialize in a March Pantry Day.

There were many disappointing moments and but also several project milestones that revealed progress had been made. We were hoping to build a strong relationship with the local 100 Precinct, especially in our efforts to have street and community activities at the front of the church. However, while we hoped to get the full cooperation of the 100 Precinct, they were hands off when it came to assisting with the residents of the nearby Arverne By the Sea condominium development. One such example was our desire to have a street fair that would block off the street and required a few auxiliary cops. The precinct told us that the community would immediately object to the idea due to the noise and that they required signatures from the residents. In the past, these same residents had called the precinct to complain about noise emanating from the church. This information discouraged everyone who was part of the project. During ongoing conversations, especially during the month of January and February, precinct representatives promised to show up at some of the church's celebration, though they never followed through. Their absence may have been because of the need for additional security at the March St. Patrick's Day parade in Manhattan.

The absence of any members of the invited churches and pastors of the AME denomination within the same local district of Bethel AME was disappointing and hurtful. We had sent letters to fifteen churches to come out and participate, and no one from the churches or their pastors came. Additionally, no one sent letters explaining their absence. The lack of support felt like a personal blow, and I and the committee continued to wonder why none of the churches came out. Internally amongst the members of the church, they concluded that this was the status quo in the relationship between Bethel AME and other churches. Due to the distance of the church, hardly any of the AME churches in Manhattan ever supported the events of our geographically distant church.

The week before Pantry Day, we made some negative assumptions and conclusions about other AME churches in Manhattan. It was a low point of the project as the Lay Advisory Committee wanted to have on hand a good show of support from the other pastors and leaders within the AME. However, on Pantry Day itself, their absence was not noticeable due to the number of local people who came out to the event. Altogether, Pantry Day became a historical and providential day in the history of Bethel AME that would never be forgotten.

Conclusion

The Pantry Day project was relationally challenging, physically exhausting, educationally enhancing, and spiritually transforming. The greatest take away from the project was observing how each of the participants became fully engaged in the project from the outset and how the project radically transformed specific areas of their lives. Although the project members were required to follow a schedule that at first was not too demanding, time eventually became the greatest asset and gift offered.

The transformation started at the lines for the food pantry on Thursdays when the committee members heard the stories of over a hundred individuals weekly of why they needed the food pantry. These conversations instilled a certain humility within the volunteers. Not only did the lines affect those who volunteered their time, but the stories of the patrons affected the lives of those from Bethel AME also.

Pantry Day allowed communal members to start to see the church and the pantry differently and as a beneficial part of the community. Before Pantry Day, the community and church members were oblivious to the significance of the pantry and the lives it was affecting. Post-Pantry Day, the people in the line, the regular pantry workers, and the people of the community saw the importance of Bethel AME Church as whole within the community and not just as a food pantry. Pantry Day increased membership of the church from fifteen members to now over thirty-five in attendance, revealing the need for Pantry Day and how it was the work of God Himself.

Although the members of the Lay Advisory Committee were students enrolled at Drew, they declared that they became students who were stretched beyond their comfort zone. They learned of Peter Drucker and personal and corporate assessment questions. They were challenged not to accept “no” as the end of the matter without looking at other options. The meetings helped to foster their marriages, their relationships with co-workers, and their ministry in their churches.

At the first meetings, personalities within the Lay Advisory Committee clashed and some even left the group out of discomfort and aggravation. However, those who stayed started to see the church and community differently. The exit interviews showed that they felt more confident in their ministry roles than when they first entered the group.

Spiritual transformation, community development, and church growth were all results of Pantry Day. In the end, it was truly evident that God was indeed glorified in all of us who learned to humble ourselves and serve the people in our community.

Personal Reflection

My first few months at Bethel AME were terrifying and filled with headaches as I wondered what direction God was taking the church. From a personal perspective, the church needed to get more people in immediately. From a student perspective, it was a project for which I had no idea how to obtain the necessary resources and people. However, from a spiritual viewpoint, I realized that God had sent me there and it was not any doing of my own. I began to believe that God did not design any church to fail and that churches fail when leaders and pastors take their eyes off God.

Many voices in the leadership of Bethel AME tried to affect my thoughts concerning the food pantry. They declared it a waste of time. At first, I began to believe it because of its lack of financial contribution to the maintenance of the church building, including the money for lights and heat and other bills that the church so desperately needed. It was not until a class session at Drew in which I spoke with Dr. Kevin Miller that I reframed my understanding of the importance of the food pantry.¹ Dr. Miller and my cohorts allowed me to see that the congregants I was seeking were in the food pantry lines. I had failed to see that these people were already coming and all I had to do was the work of harvesting them.

The work was not easy and oftentimes very frustrating, especially because I was a new pastor without adequate mentoring. Perhaps one of my greatest assets were the

¹ Dr. Kevin Miller is the Director of Theological Admissions at Drew University and is the professor of new incoming students for the DMIN Project, Church, and Community Development.

works of Peter Drucker which increased my understanding of not only nonprofits but of learning to work with groups and peoples within the church. Peter Drucker's assessment questions were significant at every step of the project in keeping me focused on the tasks at hand for the church and the project. While I had many personal highs and lows during the implementation of the project, one of my personal transforming moments was learning to let go and trust people with the project and, most significantly with parts of the church service. The lack of confidence in the volunteers and members was one of my faults that the Lay Advisory Committee members pointed out.

At times, I found myself angry at a church member or a Lay Advisory Committee member because they forgot to complete a task, or did not perform to my standards. These moments highlighted the ways in which I needed to change during this journey to grow Bethel AME.

I thought this project was going to be a transformative project for Bethel AME. Instead, over the six months of the project and the year of pastoring, I was transformed by the lives of those who came to the pantry. As I began to attend the pantry every Thursday, it allowed me to personally interact with the people in the line. Their stories and the lives they were living impacted me. People wanted to meet me personally in order to express their gratitude for the pantry. Their amazement that I would take the time to come and serve the food bags solidified our bond.

Each week I would invite the same people in the pantry line to the church service. It was evident that some answered yes, only to get their food bags and to quickly avert any guilt they might feel. The task for me was to be consistent in speaking with them and reminding them that the church was there for them. As the people became more

comfortable with my presence, one lady pulled me aside and confided in me that she did not come because she could not afford any church shoes to go with her dress. As mentioned above, I told her to come in her sneakers, and on the following Sunday, she was one of the first persons in the sanctuary. Her presence had such an effect that I asked the leadership to bless the same lady with money for a pair of size ten shoes. It is stories like these that we can tell because of Pantry Day.

Finally, as a pastor and as a preacher, this project taught me the importance of love for a congregation that may not understand the importance of the community they are called to serve. Because of this doctoral project, I am a personal witness of the transformation that can happen while serving as a pastor. My preaching has come more Christ-centered and more focused on serving the public. I have learned that service to the community comes from wanting church growth. That service must not be simply posted on the bulletin walls of the church or the announcement boards but rather loudly broadcasted to the community. Both Jesus Christ and John shouted at the top of their lungs of the change that the community and the church needed to make and the actions that ought to be taken. In doing so, they healed the people of the community. They brought them back to life, by changing them, delivering them, transforming them, and saving them. That is the work of Bethel AME: to be that transformative voice in the years to come. I am ever grateful for the change and the personal transformation I experienced and the glory that God received through the project of Pantry Day.

APPENDIX A:
PANTRY DAY POSTER



APPENDIX B:
96TH CHURCH ANNIVERSARY



APPENDIX C:

REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FROM VISITORS

Bethel (Arverne) AME Church| Rev. Dave K. Allen. Pastor

215 Beach 77th Street| Arverne, New York 11692| Phone-718.474.7712

|bethelArverne@gmail.com

Name _____

Address: _____

Home Phone: _____ Cell Phone: _____

Email Address:

Best Method of Contact: email Telephone

Marital Status: Married Single Divorced DOB: _____

Age Range: 13-19 x 20-29 x 30-39 x 40-49 x 50+x

Please circle what applies: first time visitor. x. Returning Visitor. x.

x.I would like a visit from the pastor . x. I would like more information about

Bethel AME.

Please list children under the age of 18 living with you:

Name _____

Name _____

Are you presently using our Food pantry? Yes. No. (Please circle).

Thank you for visiting, we look forward to seeing you again!

APPENDIX D:

CRITICAL LOG ASSESSMENT OF LAY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting: _____

Scripture _____

Task at Hand for the Night _____

Names of Lay Advisory Members in Attendance:

Date and Leaders of Last meeting: _____

Purpose of Meeting Held _____

Meeting Abbreviated Notes:

Next Steps _____

APPENDIX E:
PANTRY DAY TURNOUT



APPENDIX F:
FOOD PANTRY LINE AT BETHEL AME



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