

## **ABIDE: A Model for Renewing Smaller Congregations**

Ron Crandall

Professor Emeritus, Asbury Theological Seminary  
Executive Director, SLI/ABIDE

### **The Challenge**

Unlike Bill Hybels, the founding pastor of the Willow Creek mega-church, who declared that the “local church is the hope of the world,”<sup>1</sup> George Barna, a respected and experienced researcher in the United States, has indicated in several recent writings his great disappointment in the ability of local churches to produce true disciples of Jesus Christ. In his book *Revolution*,<sup>2</sup> Barna writes:

One of the great frustrations of my life has been the disconnection between what our research consistently shows about churched Christians and what the Bible calls us to be . . . . My original assumption as we set out to profile the hallmarks of contemporary spiritual transformation was that most of the life change we found would be related to the ministry of the local church. We spent several years searching for evidence that God was at work changing lives through churches and discovering how that process worked. While we certainly found some wonderful examples, I was stunned—and deeply disappointed—at how relatively rare such instances were. (31, 53)

Instead of finding transformative “formulas” in local churches, Barna concludes that there is a spiritual revolution going on beyond the local church in what he calls “spiritual mini-movements” and identifies the two fastest growing models of such revolutionaries house churches and cyber-church formations. Because his concern is for revolutionary transformation both for individuals and for society he concludes:

Every Revolutionary I have interviewed described a network of Christians to whom he or she relates regularly and a portfolio of spiritual activities which he or she engages in on a regular basis. . . . Compared to the “average” Christian I encounter in our national surveys, I estimate that the “average” Revolutionary is substantially more Spirit-led, faith-focused, scripturally literate, and biblically obedient than their more traditional counterparts who are embedded within a congregation. (116)

Our research shows that local churches have virtually no influence in our culture. The seven dominant spheres of influence are movies, music, television, books, the Internet, law, and family. The second tier of influencers is comprised of entities such as schools, peers, newspapers, radio, and businesses. The local church appears among entities that have little or no influence on society. (118)

Barna observes that revolutions are never entirely popular. In former eras

“revolutionaries” such as John Wesley and George Whitfield often withstood harsh attacks from established churches who complained bitterly that the itinerants used unorthodox means of reaching people, disrupted the status and flow of existing ministries, threatened the stability of society, and undermined the security and authority of pastors and denominational executives (111).

So, if there is something our own “revolutionary” heritage contributes to Christian Formation today, what might that be? Of special interest to me is what that might look like to hundreds of thousands of smaller congregations around the world today, much more like the early Methodist societies than today’s “standard” committee rich and discipleship poor churches.

### **“Turnaround” Observations**

For more than 30 years I’ve carried a special concern for the laypersons and pastors that labor in older, established, traditional, and smaller congregations. I suppose it all started when I discovered that my seminary education had contributed a great deal to my theological education but very little to my ability to either understand or withstand the small church reaction to the “revolutionary” mindset I brought with me to pastoral ministry. Because my own life had been profoundly stirred by my encounter with Christ, my bias was to think that this sort of joyful intimacy with God ought to be the experience of each and every Christian disciple. I’m sure, therefore, that I came on “too strong” and almost totally lost my ability to pastor and lead that congregation. This experience of “new pastor high expectation burnout” in smaller churches is far more common than I realized back then, but that early sense of confusion and near failure led me to read and research everything I could on the unique dynamics of smaller local churches.

After six years of carrying this concern as part of my portfolio at the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship, and after twenty-five years of teaching at Asbury Theological Seminary and writing three books on the subject of ministry in smaller congregations, I thought I had discovered most of what produced “turnaround.” Although it has been more than a decade since my book *Turnaround Strategies for the Small Church*<sup>3</sup> was first published, it still receives strong affirmation as a study of how 100 smaller congregations and the pastors who helped lead them came to the experience we called “turnaround.” We asked fifty of the largest denominations in the United States

Would you identify for us two or three of your smaller churches (under 200 members and/or 100 at worship) which have shown a remarkable turnaround in the last two to five years, including: A new sense of hope and empowerment, a new vision for mission, a new readiness to reach out to the community, a new effectiveness in evangelism, and new growth in membership/church school/worship attendance. (10)

We added to that request a note indicating that we were especially interested in stories where changes in the community would not account for the renewal and growth.

Without question a critical key to the transformation in these churches was linked to leadership. The vision, passion, people-skills, patience, love and investment in prayer manifested by these pastors accounted for much of the “turnaround” difference. Their confident trust in the gospel they lived and preached and taught was a powerful contagious force in the lives of their members—both new and old. However, a follow up contact with these same 100 churches a decade after reporting on their success stories revealed that upwards of 75% of the 37 we were able to get reports from had in fact “turned around again” or once more become churches struggling for survival. Many of those we could not connect with were closed or for some other reason unwilling to participate in the follow up study. Overwhelmingly, the decline was reported as what happened during one or more of the churches’ pastoral transitions. It was also clear that the churches continuing to show the most “turnaround” energy and growth were those that had the same pastor even after 10 years. Some of these were now averaging 200, 350, and even 700 in worship. One was now involved in planting 65 churches in 6 countries, and another had taken over management of the community centers in a Midwestern city and had three worship services and a staff of over 30 full-time and part-

time employees. In these churches it was clear that “members” were excited to become both “disciples” and “missionaries.”

### **Perspectives from Ireland**

A second reflection emerges from my recent opportunity to work with the Methodist Church in Ireland. Never having been to Ireland, it was a dream come true to be invited to fly over and teach seminars on “turnaround” for smaller churches in several locations. Of course, in many ways the context is quite different than in the United States. The Protestant/Catholic split is far more political than it is spiritual, and the hundreds of years of tension over this divide has made it quite a challenge for the Methodist Church to practice its *via media* (middle way) with an evangelistic focus rather than just protect its 260 years of heritage.

The April 2007 edition of the *Methodist Newsletter*<sup>4</sup> published in Belfast contained an article written by Henry Holloway and John Weir listed on the cover as “Survival of Smaller Societies.” The essence of the concern is clear in the title—survival. The authors write:

(A)re there those who are prepared to face this problem head on? . . . Are we, as will unquestionably happen, going to allow these beloved brethren in their struggling societies to die on the vine? Or are we going to encourage and assist them in every way possible to become grafted into a living vine before it is too late?

My own District Superintendent in the Kentucky Conference in the United States predicted last year that perhaps a third of all the congregations in her district would be closed in the next five to seven years. Financial considerations (salary, housing expenses, health insurance, pension, and apportionments) when using full-time and fully ordained elders to serve these churches are certainly near the top of the list of obstacles. But perhaps a larger problem is the overall malaise and low self-image of many of these congregations. They simply have run out of energy, ideas, and motivation to carry on as those truly invested in God’s mission and Christ’s great commission in their community. Pastors come and go, and in fact this appears to be a critical problem for these smaller congregations. Some who come do a wonderful work of care giving, preaching and teaching. Some even reach out and attract a few new members to the church. But overall nothing changes except the emphases that each new pastor brings, and the downward death spiral seems to move ever closer to the inevitable.

How can we talk about or develop new patterns for “discipleship” when addressing many of our faithful older church members and congregations? Their only hope often seems to be that just maybe they will get a younger family in the parsonage or manse next time, and maybe the next pastor will get some things going and a few more people here—our kind of people.

My own take on the problem is, however, much more like what the article by Holloway and Weir suggests: “encourage and assist them in every way possible to become grafted into a living vine before it is too late.” The answer is not merely in another pastor, as important as pastoral leadership is, but in learning as a congregation how to become grafted into the true and living vine.

### Looking at the problem

Probably there is never just one problem. We could look at Paul's lists of concerns expressed to his churches in the Epistles, or the turmoil faced by the Church in Acts, or John's Revelation concerning the seven churches of Asia, and discern several possible candidates for "the problem." Human sin and self-promotion hasn't disappeared entirely off the face of the earth nor from the Church. But at least one special problem inherent in smaller congregations is the ancient dependence on the "parson" as "*the person*."

The revolution Barna describes as underway and being needed is largely based on a true "network" of like minded souls without much regard for hierarchy and the lay-clergy split, willing to discover whatever will help them radically and joyfully discern and obey the will of God for their own lives and for the betterment of society. In John Wesley's terms they have discovered the "medicine of life" and let go of "lifeless, formal religion."

We see--and who does not?--the numberless follies and miseries of our fellow creatures. We see on every side either men of no religion at all or men of a lifeless, formal religion. We are grieved at the sight, and should greatly rejoice if by any means we might convince some that there is a better religion to be attained, a religion worthy of God that gave it. And this we conceive to be no other than love: the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God with all our heart and soul and strength, as having first loved *us*, as the fountain of all the good we have received, and of all we ever hope to enjoy; and the loving every soul which God hath made, every man on earth, as our own soul.

This love we believe to be the medicine of life, the never-failing remedy, for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of men. Wherever this is, there are virtue and happiness, going hand in hand. There is humbleness of mind, gentleness, longsuffering, the whole image of God, and at the same time a 'peace that passeth all understanding', and 'joy unspeakable and full of glory' . . .

This is the religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love and joy and peace, having its seat in the heart, in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth not only in all innocence--for 'love worketh no ill to his neighbour'--but likewise in every kind of beneficence, in spreading virtue and happiness all around it.<sup>5</sup>

But the medicine and its "fruits" quickly dissipate if the medicine is dispensed by only one person rather than by the whole fellowship of Christ's disciples. This lesson Wesley learned early on in the Methodist movement and thus required strict accountability for all those in the early societies to attend to all the means of grace provided by God to keep the movement from becoming what he feared—"a dead sect, having the form of religion without power."<sup>6</sup>

My observation is that the primary problem (at least the one that can be most easily addressed) lies in our current understanding of both discipleship and leadership. Often there is very little effort to clearly define what is expected, even required, from those who are members of our congregations except a one time nod of the head and low voiced response to a couple of questions about beliefs and about "supporting the church with prayers, presence, gifts, and service." Christian discipleship is not merely nor primarily about affirming a few beliefs and supporting the local church or the denomination. These commitments do not a movement make, nor maintain! Christ followers are about one thing: following Jesus Christ as the living and true Lord of heaven and earth. This they do by abiding in him as the true vine of life, being flooded by divine love, and joyfully obeying all that Jesus commanded including especially his great commission (John 15,

Matthew 28). And they engage in this kingdom business as a band of Christ followers, not merely as Christian believers supporting one appointed (or called) pastor-shepherd, but as a team of co-laborers with the chief Revolutionary himself.

Our struggling and smaller congregations need an immersion in a contagious and revolutionary reality that conquers fear, and inspired by “love divine all loves excelling” lives each day and every week expecting to see and be part of the miraculous activity of God in the lives of others.

### **One Attempt at a Solution**

This paper does not pretend to address all the possible ways Christians can be formed in their faith and fulfill in the words of Charles Wesley:

A Charge to keep I have, a God to glorify,  
A never dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky.  
To serve this present age, my calling to fulfill;  
O may it all my powers engage to do my Master’s will.<sup>7</sup>

However, my own special concern for the future of struggling smaller churches leads me to outline a model that is proving to be helpful for a growing number of Methodist congregations. The model is called ABIDE and is currently being employed by the United Methodist Church in two areas of the United States—Texas and North Carolina.

First, let me offer a bit of background. In December 2004, using a little money from a Lilly grant, a two-day consultation on the future of the smaller church was called together at Asbury Theological Seminary with sixteen persons from five denominations attending. The goal of the occasion was not to propose a program or a solution to observed problems, but to prayerfully ask the question “What might God be saying to some of us who value these hundreds of thousands of smaller congregations regarding their possible role in the kingdom over the next few decades?”

A proposal emerging from the event was that perhaps some of us ought to commit ourselves to meeting once a month for the next year or so to explore how we might design a renewal model and a revitalizing movement among thousands of smaller churches across the United States. Twelve indicated an interest, eight persons made the commitment to invest the long-term time and energy, and two foundations believing in us and in the obvious need offered a total of \$70,000 over two years to fund the travel and housing expenses for these gatherings.

By nature we were not a group normally very patient about “process.” We were all very busy and productive leaders in our various fields. We were pastors, authors, denominational leaders, professors, lay consultants, and entrepreneurs. We wanted a fairly quick “fix” and we all had ideas of what was needed based on our own expertise and experience. We read books, we accepted research assignments, we reported and even instructed each other, and we met with groups and individual “experts” in various parts of the country trying to listen, learn, and propose alternatives.

Two of the initial group of eight had to drop out, and two others were invited to join. Month after month we met. As the time passed more than anything else we were simply learning how much we valued each other and our time together, but we also kept focused on our target—designing a model of intervention for smaller churches that could become a movement of God for their own revitalization and their effective investment in doing the work of the kingdom. We covenanted together to practice accountability each time we gathered.

At each gathering we employed a variation of what has become known as the “L<sup>3</sup> Incubator” (Loving, Learning, Leading) model of leadership development. One of our members, Craig Robertson, helped develop this approach for the church. We spent time together in worship and prayer. We held each other accountable for reporting on how well we had done at being faithful to a discipline we had named the month before that would “help enhance my relationship with Jesus Christ and result in becoming more Christ like and the leader God has in mind.” We came prepared to examine specific areas of research and data related to our smaller congregations and to biblical and historical perspectives. One of our members became deeply invested in exploring the concept of “glory” in the Bible and also in Wesley’s writings. And we tried to ask what “program” elements might assist in creating a true movement and not just a resource.

In time, and in fact at one specific meeting, we almost felt overwhelmed with something that happened. We saw all of the pieces coming together around the John 15:1-17 passage of intimate relationship, discipleship, fruitfulness, and glorifying God. As we sought to combine all of the lessons gleaned through 15 months of work and prayer, we found the word to describe the new offering—ABIDE. Our deep concern was to aid in the development of a discipleship-leadership team for each congregation that participated. We believed that renewal begins with a deep sense of personal renewal and conceptual renewal. The usual direction for such encounters with God’s design is toward missiological renewal and in time congregational renewal and organizational renewal.<sup>8</sup>

It eventually dawned on us that what we were “designing” was not new. In fact it was rather ancient, but recovered again and again to enable true renewal movements to take wing and keep flying. We recognized it as a recapitulation of the early Wesleyan revival. John and Charles Wesley discerned that unless Christian disciples were bound together in special groups, the momentum of both their personal growth and that of the movement would fail. These brothers required every new member of the movement to be in a small accountability group known simply as a *class meeting*. Week after week persons had to respond to their class leader’s inquiry of how it was with their souls and rehearse the degree to which they had succeeded or failed in their pursuit of God and godly living. This was expected of both those who already knew what grace meant through fully trusting in Christ alone for their salvation, and for those still trying to discern and experience this reality. As long as persons continued in the movement they had to continue to meet weekly in *class* or move to another level of disciplined life in groups designed for aiding their progression in holiness and service. Sadly this model of accountable discipleship and leadership development was abandoned by Methodists in

North America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a decision undoubtedly contributing to their decline during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But two other groups instituted by the Wesleys proved to be most helpful in our reflection: (1) the *bands*, which continued the disciplines of the class meeting but with greater focus on overcoming sin, and the pursuit of holiness, and (2) the *select band* (or *select society*) formed mostly to enhance a deep love for God and one another through trust and mutual sharing *and* to create a leadership team for each *society* (what we might today call a congregation) and for the entire movement. In this group, there was no designated leader, but all were fully engaged in speaking freely and discerning God’s guidance for the whole endeavor.

We had stumbled on to the benefits of all three groups wrapped up in one. What would happen, we asked, if teams combining the benefits of the *class*, the *band* and the *select band* could be launched in thousands of smaller churches? Could this three-fold “Wesleyan” approach of committing to accountable discipleship, developing a bond of love, and learning how to lead together—our L<sup>3</sup> ABIDE model—help produce a renewal movement that could both assist in initial *turnaround* and survive the *beyond* of pastoral transitions because the leadership and ownership of the vision would remain in tact? We had confidence that it could, and officially launched the Small Church Leadership Initiative (SCLI)<sup>2</sup> and the ABIDE project to assist in the development of such teams.

### Update

Along with the two locations already into their second round of ABIDE events, bishops and other leaders in several United Methodist and other Methodist-heritage bodies (Free Methodist, Wesleyan, Methodist Church of Ireland, Nazarenes in Northern UK, and the Methodist Church of Brazil) along with other denominations such as Mennonites and Disciples of Christ have expressed interest in the ABIDE model. At this point we are still working through all of the details of expanding the leadership base of presenters and coaches and reducing the cost. We have a significant need for gift and grant funding to support the various overhead and staffing demands of implementation. Almost all of this undertaking has so far been by volunteer extra effort. As the opportunities before us expand and we try to keep up in a timely manner with the demand, we realize it is time for a more full-time director and the establishment of a larger board of directors.

Additional SCLI projects are also underway. Several large churches in the United States have indicated an interest in partnering with us to invest their own leadership expertise, facilities and mission funds in serving the multitude of smaller churches in their ministry radius. Individual “turnaround” smaller churches are wanting to put on mini-versions of ABIDE and/or inspirational training events along with SCLI personnel and resources. Printed and Internet materials, website management, telephone-video conferences, and new books and published articles are on the horizon. We believe God is truly in this, and our prayers for having a part in creating a movement to revitalize smaller churches is beginning to bear fruit—much fruit.

Thus, we are delighting in the promise of our Lord as we seek to be faithful and fruitful disciples who glorify the Father and know the joy of the Son in the love of the Spirit:

5Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers;

such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15)

ABIDE . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The Effective Church Series, Herb Miller, ed. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> *Methodist Newsletter*, Vol 35, No 375.

<sup>5</sup> From "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 11, edited by Gerald R. Cragg: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 45,

<sup>6</sup> From "Thoughts upon Methodism" in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 9: *The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, ed. Rupert Davies; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 527.

<sup>7</sup> From "A Charge to Keep I Have," by Charles Wesley, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, no. 413.

<sup>8</sup> This description of a congregational renewal movement is foreshadowed by Howard Snyder in *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* Grand Rapids: Academic Books, Zondervan, 1989.

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