

An Analytical Review of the Local Church Experiment (LCX)

1.0 Introduction: Context and Purpose of the Experiment

This document provides a formal, objective analysis of the Institute of Cultural Affairs' (ICA) Local Church Experiment (LCX), a significant initiative that sought to redefine the role and function of congregations in modern society. This review will critically assess a uniquely integrated model of congregational renewal whose principles remain salient for contemporary community organizing. By examining its distinct organizational structure, its systematic tactical approach, and its tangible outcomes as reported by participants, this analysis illuminates the program's design, application, and lasting influence on both religious and secular community development.

The Local Church Experiment was formally launched by the ICA in 1970. It was conceived as a six-year "socio-spiritual experiment in the reconstruction of the Local Church," signaling a deliberate and methodological approach to congregational renewal. The experiment was not a passive study but an active intervention designed to test new models of church life and mission.

At its core, the experiment's mission was to equip churches to become more effective agents of social and spiritual transformation within their communities. Its operational scope was considerable, ultimately involving over two hundred churches across the United States. This broad participation was a key element of the experimental design, intended to test the program's viability across a wide spectrum of demographic and geographic contexts. The following analysis will begin by detailing the specific architectural and tactical framework that gave the program its unique and powerful structure.

2.0 The Architectural Framework of the Experiment

A defining characteristic of the Local Church Experiment was its deliberate and comprehensive design. This was not a loose collection of ideas but a carefully constructed framework of interconnected structures, guiding principles, and intellectual resources. This architectural integrity was essential for guiding hundreds of diverse congregations toward a common set of goals, providing a unified methodology for renewal while allowing for adaptation to local contexts. The framework can be understood through its organizational model, its tactical system, and its foundational intellectual works.

2.1 Organizational Structure: The Galaxy Model

A particularly innovative component of the experiment was the "Galaxy" configuration, which served as its primary structural unit. Each Galaxy was composed of four congregations, ideally from different denominations, located within a given geographic area. This unit was designed to function as a "corporate pastorate," creating a collaborative environment for clergy and laity to

share ideas, plan initiatives, and build collective structures of care for their congregations and the surrounding community.

The strategic rationale for the Galaxy model's design was rooted in experimental validity. By establishing Galaxies across the continent that represented significant ethnic, economic, and social diversity, the ICA intended to demonstrate that the model could be successfully applied in a wide variety of settings. Internally, the LCX's organizational focus was further refined into three interconnected dynamics: the **cadre** (a core leadership group), the **congregation** (the church body), and the **parish** (the broader community or neighborhood).

2.2 The Tactical System and Guiding Principles

To guide the work of the Galaxies, the LCX developed a comprehensive Tactical System. This system consisted of a set of prescribed weekly actions designed to systematically renew four key areas of congregational life: worship, study, discipline (life together), and mission. Over the course of the experiment, this system was elaborated upon in 36 distinct tactic booklets, providing practical guidance for training and action.

The entire methodology was built upon three core pillars, which emphasized a holistic approach to transformation:

1. **Contextual reeducation:** This principle aimed to replace abstract theological learning with concrete human images and real-world contexts, making faith more immediate and relevant.
2. **Structural reformulation:** This involved actively reshaping the social forms and structures of the church to better align with its mission and the needs of its community.
3. **Spirit motivation:** This focused on intentionally training and empowering lay and clergy leadership to drive the renewal process with vision and purpose.

2.3 Foundational Intellectual Works

The experiment was supported by a robust body of intellectual work, including papers, manuals, and talks that shaped its development and provided a common language and conceptual framework for participants.

Title/Author	Stated Purpose or Context
<i>The People of God Triangles</i> (1969)	Developed to discern the role of religious bodies in social change.
<i>Local Church Triangles</i>	A paper describing the specific function of the Local Church in this framework.
<i>Introduction to the Tactical Model of the Local Congregation</i> (J. Mathews)	A 1970 talk that helped 500 participants co-create the Tactical System for the experiment.
<i>The Priorities of the Tactical System</i> (1971)	A document outlining the key focus areas of the Tactical System.

<i>A Comprehensive Experiment in the Reconstruction of the Local Church</i>	The initial paper that served as a prologue to the entire experiment.
<i>The Inclusive Design</i>	The fourth in a series of five papers, describing the preparation of a congregation for participation and the formation of Galaxy and regional clusters.
<i>The Role of the Auxiliary / Auxiliary Manual</i>	Documents created to describe and support the function of auxiliary members in the experiment.
<i>The State of the Local Church Experiment</i> (1974 Talk)	An assessment after four years of the experiment, suggesting a renewed focus on the parish (the wider community).
Various Annual Talks (1970-1974)	A series of addresses by leaders like Justin Morrill, Nan Grow, Mark Poole, John Bengel, and Don Steinle, delivered to assess progress and shape the experiment's direction.

This clear and replicable framework provided the necessary tools for the experiment's practical application, the results of which are best understood through an examination of specific case studies.

3.0 Analysis of Program Implementation and Outcomes via Case Studies

The critical test of any program lies in its real-world application. This section analyzes specific examples from across the United States to assess how the LCX's architectural framework was implemented in diverse local contexts. These case studies provide a tangible measure of the program's impact on individual congregations, their leaders, and the communities they served, highlighting both the adaptability of the model and the profound changes it catalyzed.

Arizona: Foundational Influence and Adaptation

At Shadow Rock United Church of Christ in Phoenix, the ICA's Religious Studies I (RS-I) course was a direct catalyst in the church's founding in 1973. The course's influence was so foundational that its "Wedgeblade" symbol was incorporated into the church's architecture, and its curriculum was adapted for lay formation. Decades later, in 2008, this theological heritage was intentionally re-energized through the Profound Journey Dialogue (PJD), a secular adaptation of the original RS-I course, demonstrating the enduring and adaptable nature of the experiment's educational tools.

California: Translation into Secular Social Enterprise

The experience of Linda and Milan Hamilton exemplifies the translation of LCX principles into a highly successful secular venture. Challenged by their participation in the experiment to address global hunger, they founded Food for All, Inc. The organization pioneered the now-ubiquitous "add a donation" bar-code technology, allowing grocery shoppers to easily contribute at checkout. This outcome demonstrates the model's notable adaptability, powerfully illustrating two of the LCX's core pillars: it was an act of *structural reformulation*, creating an entirely new form for charitable giving, and an exercise in *contextual reeducation*, making the abstract issue

of global hunger a concrete, actionable choice at the point of sale. The organization, which incorporated a full suite of ICA methods including strategic planning events, research assemblies, and "sharing approaches that work" conferences, raised twelve million dollars for anti-hunger projects. The profound legacy of this initiative is the widespread adoption of its core technology by countless retail and non-profit organizations.

Colorado: Congregational Evolution and "Resurrection"

Evanston United Methodist Church in Denver provides a compelling example of tactical implementation and long-term transformation. David Yost, son of the pastor family, recalls a large "war board" that took over the dining room of his parents' home, mapping out the tactics and strategies of the experiment. As the congregation aged and its neighborhood changed, the church merged with another and repurposed its original building in a profound act of *structural reformulation*. Today, the facility has been "resurrected" as the Evanston Center for Spiritual Wholeness and Healing, a vibrant community hub. Former pastor Rev. Kenneth Neal described this outcome as an "amazing resurrection" and a model for other churches, demonstrating how the experiment's mission could evolve beyond the life of a single congregation.

New York: Comprehensive Tactical Application

The report from Dewey Avenue Presbyterian Church in Rochester offers a detailed view of the comprehensive application of LCX tactics. Under the leadership of Reverends Carlton and Ellie Stock, the church actively engaged in the corporate pastorate of its Galaxy, developed robust theological education for its laity, and launched significant community outreach in the surrounding Maplewood neighborhood. They also created powerful symbols to energize youth programs like the "Mighty Micros" and "Young Giants," illustrating a holistic and creative implementation of the experiment's methods.

Ohio: Clergy Support and Social Engagement

In Ohio, the LCX demonstrated a dual impact on curriculum development and clergy resilience amidst social turmoil.

- At Friendship United Methodist Church, Rev. Mark Dove utilized the experiment's educational models, adapting ICA courses to develop "How Do I Decide?" Confirmation Retreats for junior high students, a clear application of *contextual reeducation*.
- Simultaneously, Rev. Mark and Jean Poole engaged directly in broader social justice movements, with Mark working alongside Dr. Martin Luther King and facing death threats for inviting a Black pastor to preach at their church. Reflecting on this period of intense division, Jean Poole stated that the support system of the LCX was crucial: "The Galaxy model with the four congregations was a life saving model to a struggling church and would be a great structure of support for some of the current divisions that are happening in the church."

Wisconsin: Long-Term Impact and "Harvesting Seeds"

The experience in Milwaukee's Hephatha Parish illustrates the profound, multi-generational impact of the experiment. Fifty years after his participation, Rev. Bob Hanson observed a direct connection between the seeds planted by the LCX cadre in the 1970s and contemporary community efforts to address trauma, such as the SWIM (Scaling Wellness In Milwaukee) initiative. His poem, "Seeds Do Grow," articulates this legacy, framing the current work of community leaders as a harvest of the "action, resistance" and transformative efforts of that earlier era.

Other Representative Examples

The breadth of the experiment's reach is further demonstrated by brief reports from other states:

- **Kansas:** Pine Valley Christian Church in Wichita utilized the RS-I curriculum for its membership classes for 27 consecutive years, indicating its sustained value.
- **Washington:** University Baptist Church in Seattle participated in a Galaxy with Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic congregations, with its pastor recalling the deep bond and transformative journey that resulted from working corporately.

These cases reveal that the LCX was not a rigid, one-size-fits-all program but an adaptable framework that empowered local leaders to pursue renewal in ways that were authentic to their specific contexts, leading to a wide array of lasting outcomes.

4.0 The Enduring Legacy and Continued Influence

The ultimate measure of a social program's success is not its activity during a formal operational period but its long-term influence on participants and systems. Decades after the six-year experiment officially concluded, the LCX demonstrates a remarkable and enduring legacy. This influence is evident in the continued work of its alumni, the institutionalization of its community-building ethos, and the widespread dissemination of its methods and ideas far beyond their original context.

4.1 Continued Ministry and Institutionalized Social Action

Many participants integrated the principles and vision of the LCX so deeply that it shaped the entire trajectory of their subsequent careers and vocations. Their ongoing work serves as living proof of the experiment's lasting impact.

Profiles in Continued Service

- **Rev. Russell Brown:** Directly credits his ICA experience with providing "a vision of how the church universal could be an instrument of social change and justice-making," which he states was critical to his decision to enter ordained ministry. His blog, "Russellings of the Spirit," is a direct continuation of the LCX's focus on *contextual reeducation*.

- **Bill and Carol Schlesinger:** After participating in the LCX in New York, they went on to co-direct Project Vida in El Paso, Texas. Their work institutionalizes the experiment's ethos of community-driven development through profound *structural reformulation*.
- **Nelson Stover:** Captured the intellectual capital of the experiment in his seminary thesis, *New Directions for Religious Communities*, and continues to share these reflections through his personal webpage, furthering the work of *contextual reeducation*.
- **Rev. H.A. 'Bud' Tillinghast:** Continues to advocate for the principles of church renewal through his writings, including a 2018 paper on the "Subversive Focus" of the early church, as well as a blog and Facebook page, embodying the experiment's commitment to ongoing theological reflection.

A primary example of the experiment's legacy being institutionalized is **Project Vida** in El Paso, Texas. Co-directed by LCX alumni Bill and Carol Schlesinger, this comprehensive social care agency has been operating for over 25 years. It embodies the experiment's focus on community-discerned need, providing services in healthcare, affordable housing, early childhood development, and leadership training. Project Vida stands as a powerful testament to how the LCX's framework for social action could be scaled into a durable, multi-faceted, and impactful community organization.

4.2 Dissemination of Methods and Ideas

Beyond the direct work of its participants, the LCX's influence has propagated through the widespread adoption of its methods and the continued circulation of its core ideas.

The most prominent example of methodological dissemination is the "**add a donation**" **technology** pioneered by the Hamiltons' Food for All initiative. This simple, effective fundraising mechanism, born from an LCX-inspired project, has been adopted by countless retail and nonprofit organizations globally. It represents a key innovation that has transcended its origins to become a systemic feature of modern philanthropy, demonstrating how a single idea from the experiment could achieve massive, independent scale.

Furthermore, the intellectual influence of the experiment persists through a living tradition of reflection and scholarship. The ongoing work of participants who share their insights through blogs, social media, and academic papers ensures that the lessons and methods of the LCX remain accessible to a new generation of leaders and organizations seeking to foster community renewal.

5.0 Conclusion: Overall Assessment of the Program

In synthesizing the findings of this review, it is clear that the Local Church Experiment (LCX) was a uniquely ambitious and impactful program. Its combination of a rigorous conceptual framework, a practical tactical system, and a deep commitment to empowering local leaders created a powerful engine for change that has continued to resonate for over five decades.

Relative to its stated goal of being a "socio-spiritual experiment in the reconstruction of the Local Church," the LCX can be assessed as a profound success. The evidence from diverse case

studies demonstrates that it not only catalyzed renewal within congregations during its six-year operational window but also equipped participants with a vision and a set of tools that they would carry forward for a lifetime. The experiment's impact was not confined to abstract theological shifts; it resulted in tangible new ministries, innovative social enterprises, and repurposed community assets.

The program's enduring efficacy can be attributed to a dialectic between its robust, replicable architecture—the Galaxy model and the Tactical System—and its profound capacity for empowering individual agency. This combination of a strong, adaptable framework and an intense focus on *spirit motivation* inspired and equipped individuals to become lifelong agents of social and spiritual change. From community organizers in Texas to social entrepreneurs in California, the LCX effectively transformed participants into catalysts for renewal in their own right.

Ultimately, the Local Church Experiment offers enduring lessons. Its principles of collaborative action, contextual education, and intentional leadership development remain highly relevant for contemporary organizations—both secular and religious—that seek to foster authentic, community-driven renewal and advance the cause of social justice.