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The church revolution from the edge

Dottie Escobedo-Frank
George Fox University

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THE CHURCH REVOLUTION FROM THE EDGE

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

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Dottie Escobedo-Frank

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Dottie Escobedo-Frank

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D.Min. Dissertation

This is to certify that the D.Min. Dissertation of

DOROTHEA ESCOBEDO-FRANK

has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on March 13, 2012
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Dissertation Committee:

Primary Advisor: Deborah Loyd, M.D.

Secondary Advisor: R. Larry Shelton, Th.D.

Tertiary Advisor: Leonard I. Sweet, Ph.D.

Expert Advisor: Amy R. Doherty, M.A.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Jesus Christ,
Who still moves in The United Methodist Church,

And to my family,
Who continue to give meaning to daily life,

And to my professors,
Who call us to soar higher than we imagined possible...

EPIGRAPH

*I've been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.
Looks like between 'em
They done tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin'—
But I don't care!
I'm still here*

(Langston Hughes, in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*)

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ABSTRACT

I am studying The United Methodist Church (UMC) in order to acknowledge factors that are keeping it in a state of disease, decline and death, and propose a move forward toward rebirth and resurrection. Other solutions that have been proposed include 1) the Church Growth Movement; 2) the Programmatic Denominational church; 3) the Emergent and Missional movement, and 4) The Call to Action of The United Methodist Church. I claim that the key to move forward is centered in the experiences of 1) leaning into death and resurrection; 2) reclaiming the original, simple, methodical structure of the Methodist movement; 3) calling for a church transformation that is both insurgent and revolutionary; 4) and providing breath to a right-brained, creative and maverick church that is rising at the edges of the United Methodist Church.

SECTION 1:

THE PROBLEM

THE PROBLEM

The church of today is nothing like the church that began as a movement of people called “Methodists.” The contrast is palpable, visual, and stunningly silent. At the start, John Wesley, a second-generation Church of England priest, was influenced by his friend, George Whitefield, also an Anglican clergy. Whitefield preached in the London churches, but they soon filled up so that there was no room, and so he began taking his preaching in the streets and open spaces. One place he preached was at the mines, greeting the miners as they left their shifts in the dark crevices of the earth. The miners came out of the caves with black, coal-stained faces. They met their families, and sat to hear the preacher, glad for one more day to come back to the top of the earth. Whitefield preached with a fervor that was astounding and caused people to take note, and he preached a word of forgiveness that gave hope to even the hardest of hearts. The miners and their families were comforted by news of a Savior that loved sinners. The description of those meetings provided a stark visual: streaks of white running down faces where tears washed away the black soot. The life transformations were visible to all. John Wesley also began to follow Whitefield’s lead, and preached to huge crowds on the green hills of England, and then America.¹

Contrast to today where churches are empty and religion is scorned. The mainline church today is in deathly states, with most American churches either in decline or plateau. The delineation of loss in the recent past of mainline churches is startling. Between 1965 to 1985 denominations showed losses as follows:

¹ Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership, Jesus’ Way of Creating Vision, Shaping Values & Empowering Change* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 88-89.

- Disciples of Christ declined by 42%
- Episcopalians declined by 20%
- Presbyterians declined by 24%
- United Methodists declined by 16%²

The current situation is also telling. The *USA Today* reports from the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), there is an 11% decrease in those who call themselves Christian. It shows the biggest growth factor occurring in those who say they have “no religion.” This group grew from 8.2% in 1990 to 15% in 2008. The article claims that a larger portion of America is growing up without faith.³ Driscoll states that the neighborhood churches of today are,

...more akin to museums memorializing a yesterday when God showed up in glory to transform people, than to the pivot points of a movement working to reform the culture of the present day.⁴

Other statistics confirm the desperate state of affairs. In The United Methodist Church in the United States, between 1998-2008:

- The average worship attendance declined by 9%
- The number of churches decreased by 6%
- The number of baptisms decreased by 31%
- The number of professions of faith decreased by 25%
- The number of clergy are 88% White and 76% male (2008)
- The makeup of church membership is 90% White (2008)
- The average age of clergy rose from 49 to 54
- The financial expenditures per member rose 61%
- The average church costs in 2008: 36% for building and debt; 34% for clergy and lay staffing; 20% for apportionments, benevolence, and programs⁵

The modern UMC is paying more money to fund a smaller, less relevant mission in the world. Additionally, every week, 43,000 American church-goers are leaving church,

²James Emory White, *Rethinking the Church, A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 19.

³“Most Religious Groups in USA Have lost Ground, Survey Finds,” *USA Today*, March 17, 2009.

⁴Mark Driscoll, *Radical Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 18.

⁵“The United Methodist Church Operational Assessment Project, Executive Summary Presentation.” Prepared by APEX HG LLC, June 29, 2010, 182-183.

seeking other ways to attend to their spiritual connection. In The United Methodist Church, 2000 leave per week.⁶ Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of Resurrection United Methodist Church, states,

The latest statistics for the United Methodist Church in the United States show that average worship attendance declined from 2006 to 2007 by 73,323. If our worship attendance were to continue to decline at this rate, there would be no one left in our churches in 44 years.⁷

Most United Methodist Churches are small congregations who could calculate the date of death of their church to be much shorter than 44 years, based on the actual age of the congregants.

The Church is also not trending with the culture. For example, listed in “The Top Ten Workforce Trends” are the following notables:

- *The future of the workforce should not be defined by geography, but by talent.
- *The aging of the population in America and Europe will have dramatic effects on society and the economy.
- *Hispanics and women will dominate the future U.S. workforce.
- *Women will comprise a high percentage of new workers and leaders, forever changing the politics of boardrooms and markets.
- *Innovation will be a key driver of workforce skills, requiring the education system to be completely overhauled.⁸

These trends occur in the face of the United Methodist Church being led by mostly male, Anglo, and aging.

The United Methodist Church is on a steep, sloping path. Many statisticians, politicians, and church leaders have made it plain that it is a dying, dwindling denomination, and that the church is in need of quick action to move from the church of

⁶ Rev. Tom Butcher, Director of New Faith Communities, Desert Southwest Conference of The United Methodist Church, quoting from The General Council on Finance and Administration of The United Methodist Church.

⁷ Adam Hamilton, *In 44 Years U.S. UMC to Be No More?* February, 2009. <http://adamhamilton.cor.org/2009/02/12/in-44-years-us-umc-to-be-no-more>. Accessed July 5, 2011.

⁸ James Canton, Ph.D., *The Extreme Future, The Top Trends that will Reshape the World in the Next 20 Years* (England: Penguin Group, 2007), 90.

yesterday to the church of today and tomorrow. In 1990 the Bishops of The United Methodist Church formulated the cry for change with this statement:

We, the people of God called United Methodist, have come to a critical turning in our history. The world in which our heritage of faith seemed secure is passing away. We must choose now to follow the call of Jesus Christ into a new era... The obvious decline in membership of many of our congregations troubles us. We feel burdened by the increasing financial load our congregations are carrying... The realization is dawning among us that we must be more intentional about being the church God calls us to be... A deep spiritual hunger is awakening our congregations... The Spirit is calling us, in all our congregations, to a time of discernment.⁹

The Bishops called for a study of the church that would lead to a true understanding of the current state as well as strategies for change. The first study, The Operational Assessment of the United Methodist Church, found this result:

The Church is confronting a ‘creeping crisis’ of relevancy with an accompanying crisis of an underperforming economic model.¹⁰

This study found the UMC is not relevant and not fiscally sound. It is apparent that the church is in trouble, as noted by many scholars.

Craig Kennet Miller, from the General Board of Discipleship, states that the UMC is in a slow death process and there are seven nails in the coffin. They are:

1. Fiefdom mentality versus a kingdom mentality.
2. Hoarding...sitting on resources till the better end...
3. Politicizing the evangelistic enterprise...we have put our issues above faith.
4. Gatekeeping: You are a gatekeeper if you can say no to stop a new idea or to keep someone from fulfilling his or her call to ministry.
5. Jealousy.
6. Milk-toast spirituality: Revelation 3:16 calls it lukewarm.
7. Fear of accountability: To what are we willing to be accountable?¹¹

⁹ Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997). Taken from Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, *Vital Congregations—Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church*, Foundation Document, Thomas E. Frank, principal writer and consultant (Nashville: Graded Press, 1990), 9-11.

¹⁰ The United Methodist Church Operational Assessment Project, 3.

¹¹ Craig Kennet Miller, *7 Myths of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Discipleship Resources, 2008), 169-170.

Dr. Leonard Sweet states that part of the problem is that the church continues to act as “APC,” (Attractional, Propositional, and Colonial) Church, when she needs to move to the “MRI” Church (Missional, Relational, and Incarnational).¹² Sweet describes the current state as a transition from “Gutenburgers to Googleys.”¹³ Gutenburgers are those who were raised on the book, while Googleys are those who were raised on the screen. He further states that churches are “museums to modernity,” filled with “propositional impotence.”¹⁴ It is clear that the UMC, and most of the mainline churches, still operate from the tool of the written word, forgetting that the communication of the Gospel is not being heard by a visual society.

Many churches, pastors, and congregations are just beginning to wake up and notice that the pews are mostly empty, they can’t pay the light bill, and they haven’t baptized a baby, let alone a transformed adult, in years.

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers describe this state as one of befuddlement:

After so many years of defending ourselves against life and searching for better controls, we sit exhausted in the unyielding structures of organization we’ve created, wondering what happened. What happened to effectiveness, to creativity, to meaning? What happened to us? Trying to get these structures to change becomes the challenge of our lives. We draw their futures and design them into clearly better forms. We push them, we prod them. We try fear, we try enticement. We collect tools, we study techniques. We use everything we know and end up nowhere. What happened?¹⁵

What happened is the world made a paradigmatic change, and the church did not notice.

The Church went on to continue its faithful and comforting traditions, forgetting to look up and out to see what God was up to in the new world.

¹² Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C. Cook, 2009), 18.

¹³ *ibid*, 35.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 36 and 99.

¹⁵ Margaret J. Wheatley. *Finding Our Way, Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco, California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2005), 142.

The United Methodist Church in America, and the mainline church in America, is facing the biggest problem it has ever encountered. And whether or not the Church makes the necessary changes will determine if the gospel continues in this context. Hirsch believes that what happens in American Christianity is crucial to what happens in the Western world. He states, "...the battle for the future of Christianity in the west will be worked out in America."¹⁶ He sees the problem of the church and states it clearly,

To be honest, I find it very hard to see the privatized, institution-based religion that we experience now surviving into any of these futures—at least as a significant social force for good. That is, unless we adapt.¹⁷

The current structure of the church may not survive as adaptation is a difficult process. But, when institutions are facing death, sometimes the necessary changes can be implemented. It is hard to stare into the face of the church's future. It is frightening. It demands for something new to be allowed to grow. But fear can be encountered as something that paralyzes a body, or as something that forces it to run. Will the Church be able to run into a future that is unknown, but is surely better than the current state?

Change, especially deep, paradigm shifts, is always hard to bear. Some will choose not to adapt. Period. But change will come anyway. Thomas Watson, the chairman of IBM in 1943 was known to say, "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."¹⁸ Not only was he way off the mark, he was in the industry that could focus on the future possibilities of computers. And yet, Watson underestimated the move of the future toward a new communication format. The Church has its naysayers too. At

¹⁶ Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford. *Right Here Right Now, Everyday Mission for Everyday People* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2011), 236.

¹⁷ Hirsch and Ford, 257.

¹⁸ James Canton, 247.

one time the organ was considered a musical instrument of the devil.¹⁹ Today most churches not only have an organ, but now the “contemporary bands” are being called instruments of the devil.

But the fact of the matter is the Church has been stunned into silent stillness. It has sought answers, but has refused to follow the Holy Spirit’s beckoning call. Mancur Olson states systems can experience “institutional sclerosis:”

Committed to old behaviors and social systems, old technologies, and, even more important, outmoded and hard-to-change institutions, organizations, and business practices, they are either too slow or literally unable to change.²⁰

While it is well recognized that transformation is a difficult process, without it, the Church will atrophy and experience the powerlessness of muscles that cannot move. The Church must transform and move again. Alan Hirsch says,

If we fail to awaken the sleeping giant of the body of Christ, then I believe our opportunity will be lost and the church will continue to decline, and eventually become a mere cultural footnote to Western history.²¹

The Church is in dire trouble. No longer do crowds flock to hear the good news of redemption and hope. No longer is it the miner whose visible tears contrast starkly. Today it is the Church Herself that has white streaks on dark soot, for She is crying out as She knows She is dying.

¹⁹ American Guild of Organists, “Organ Spectacular”, “The Organ Past and Future” by Merrill N. Davis, III, Rochester, MN. October 2008.”<http://www.semnago.org/documents/Organ-PastPresent.pdf>. Accessed October 10, 2011.

²⁰ Richard Florida, *The Great Reset, How the Post-Crash Economy will Change the Way We Live and Work* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010), 19.

²¹ Hirsch and Ford, 258.

SECTION 2:

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

The past few decades the Church has proposed a variety of solutions. Some of them were helpful for a time, and some are still in the early stages of learning. A review of these solutions will help the Church to understand both the history and the way forward. They include the Church Growth Movement, the Programmatic, Denominational Church, the Emergent and Missional movements, and the Call to Action of the UMC.

The Church Growth Movement

The Church has been enthralled with the Church Growth Movement for the last few decades. Under this model, churches were intent on reaching culture by providing simplified messages for those who had never heard the gospel, current musical sounds to attract new attenders, and a division into different categories of groups such as children, teens, parents, and singles. The primary concern was to make people comfortable so they could be introduced to the gospel. Children, for example, were sent away to Sunday School during the worship time so that parents could have an hour of peace while the children were having fun. People were gathered in homogeneous groups, like “young married couples class,” so that comfort of sameness was felt. The church did all that it could to “attract” the newcomer, called “prechristians” or “seekers.”

Hunter clarifies this movement by quoting its definition from the American Society for Church Growth:

Church growth is that careful discipline which investigates the nature, the function, and the health of Christian churches, as they relate to the effective implementation of the Lord’s Great Commission, to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew 28:19-20). It is a spiritual conviction, yet it is practical, combining the

eternal principles of God's Word with the practical insights of social and behavioral sciences.²²

Hunter goes on to say,

The Church Growth Movement is a call to return to our roots. It is a challenge to think like a missionary, act like an ambassador, and operate like a mission.²³

The new mission field was seen as being right next door as it was noted that the population had ceased attending church services. And so the church sought ways to attract newcomers.

Book titles reflected this desire to be attractational, like "Entertainment Evangelism" by Kallestad. This church growth movement brought about the mega church, and pastors all over America flocked to conferences to learn how to be the next mega church pastor. This model still lingers on in some circles with new terminology. A recent book, "Be Fruitful and Multiply, Embracing God's Heart for Church Multiplication," speaks about growth through network multiplication.²⁴ The vestiges of the Church Growth Movement remain in the development of multiplication and network movements, and in the house church movement. These strategies call for setting up an organization of networks that provide the church experience in a wider arena, calling churches to start new churches. The central theme is that every church should continue to birth churches throughout its life span.

This next-step is one in which churches start churches or communities of faith, instead of creating a single mega church. Robert Logan states there are three ingredients necessary for church multiplication. They are:

²²Kent R. Hunter, *Confessions of a Church Growth Enthusiast* (Corunna, Indiana: Kent R. Hunter, 1997), 31.

²³ *ibid*, 144.

²⁴ Robert E. Logan, *Be Fruitful and Multiply, Embracing God's Heart for Church Multiplication* (St. Charles, Illinois: ChurchSmart Resources, 2006).

1. *Multiplication movements are empowered by God....*
2. *Multiplication movements are culturally relevant....*
3. *Multiplication movements use reproducible methods...*²⁵

Basically the multiplication movement is the Church Growth Movement on steroids. It increases the focus on numbers by creating networks of churches, much like the network marketing schemes of the 1970's.

But there has been a consequence of this movement. A widespread belief exists that it is mostly growing churches from transfers, and that the gospel is still not being proclaimed to those who have not heard. Frost and Hirsch call for a move away from the past, and describe the "Attractional Church" as having a core assumption:

...God cannot really be accessed outside sanctioned church meetings, or, at least, that these meetings are the best place for not-yet-Christians to learn about God. Evangelism therefore is primarily about mobilizing church members to attract unbelievers into church where they can experience God. Rather than being genuine 'out-reach,' it effectively becomes something more like an 'in-drag.'²⁶

Church growth started out as a way to reach out into the world, but in the end, became a model for attracting more people to gather inside large worship spaces. The Church failed to leave the building and take the gospel to the community. Instead it found a way to bring more of the community inside its walls. The problem with this is one of sustainability. The attractional church takes a lot of income to run; requires multiple technologically-savvy staff, as well as program staff, and it is always in competition with the world of entertainment. In this game, Hollywood will always win. Chester and Timmis believe **that**,

²⁵ *ibid*, 29-31.

²⁶ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come, Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003), 41.

The church is always tempted toward a church of glory, whether that takes the form of grand buildings, political influence, global structures, charismatic personalities, or megachurches.²⁷

However, real power, they state, comes with a church that knows what it means to be crucified with Christ around a theology of the cross. They accurately zoom in on this point, stating, “That means power in weakness, wisdom in folly, and glory in shame.”²⁸

With this thought in mind the church must reimagine its understanding of “success.” Is success determined by the influence of the world or is the Christian church a counter-cultural movement that lives *in* the world but does not claim to *be* of the world? The question must be wrestled to the ground, in order for the church not to lose its way.

Sally Morgenthaler, in *An Emergent Manifesto*, describes the disconnect that happens in the mega-church world:

Large church leaders have been trained in the modern, command-and-control paradigm for thirty years... The mechanical paradigm or organization largely explains why modern church leaders are trained as CEOs, not shepherds.²⁹

If the church growth movement focuses on the business of the church, and not the soul of the church, then surely the church has missed its mark. Morgenthaler digs deeper, stating,

The question is, how long can these antiquated, top-down systems last? As long as people will let them. In a push-back world, hierarchy can function only in the womb of passivity, which may be good news—at least on the survival level—for big religion. Because, if there is anything the entrepreneurial church is good at creating, it is compliant cultures—those Stepford-like minicities populated with otherwise savvy, creative human beings. Yet these otherwise savvy children of God somehow missed the memo: they have a brain, a voice, and a Jacobesque

²⁷ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis. *Total Church, A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 199.

²⁸ *ibid*, 199.

²⁹ Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds. *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), 180.

call to wrestle, not only with the living God, but with whatever institution claims to hold all truth inside its too perfect confines.³⁰

Compliant cultures occur when spiritual growth is shallow and when there is no method for engagement through feedback, interaction, or new ideas. Mega churches have notoriously bragged that people come there to be unknown, to hide out in the crowd, and do not want to be called out. But this attitude could develop a congregation where new leadership does not rise up, disciples are not called to grow, and servanthood remains something that is observed instead of lived out.

Hirsch, in *The Forgotten Ways*, describes his church as one that went from being missional to being seduced by numerical growth:

Flattered by the numerical growth, and driven by our own middle-class agendas, we thoughtlessly followed the ‘gather and amuse’ impulse implicit in church growth theory, and so we grew in numbers—but something primal and indispensable was lost in the bargain. We got more transfers from other churches, “but the flow of conversion slowed down to a trickle and then ran completely dry. Paradoxically, we became busier than ever before, but with less and less real missional impact.”³¹

His church began as an emerging church and turned into an attractional church after the church growth model, and they found themselves in the very place they originally broke away from. Corrections occurred and the church moved back to its original roots of organic ministry.

One of the most shocking examples in this movement was noticed with the unveiling of “REVEAL,” a study on Willow Creek Church, the Mecca of the mega church movement. This study showed that while Willow Creek did amazingly well in attracting people to worship and other activities, it failed to produce disciples of Jesus

³⁰ *ibid*, 181-182.

³¹ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 220.

Christ who were any different than the greater culture.³² While many thousands of people gathered at Willow Creek church, the gathering and programs failed to meet the mark of making disciples of Jesus Christ. And thousands of church pastors, who had learned from this very model, were suddenly disillusioned and began a healthy questioning around the core purpose of the church.

The Church Growth Movement has waned as it failed to sustain itself over time, and failed to make true disciples of Jesus Christ in some instances. While it succeeded in bringing in many people, and created messages that were culturally relevant, it remains to be seen whether the Church Growth Movement translated to making disciples of Jesus Christ or merely created a crowd of religiously entertained.

The Programmatic Denominational Church

While many churches were working on the Church Growth model, others merely opted out and maintain their status as denominational fixtures, not planning for growth or for change, but continuing on as usual. This large group of churches have not been given a name, nor considered a “movement,” but because they are so vast in number, it is important to relate their stand in history. This is the group of churches who chose not to choose a way forward.

When one studies the Christian bookstores it is obvious that many churches were utilizing cookie-cutter programming to meet the needs of discipleship, Bible study, and group formation. In other words, some churches relied on denominational literature and programs as their sole means of meeting the spiritual needs of the people in their context.

³² “Willow Creek Study – A Summary.” The Christian Coaching Center. By Russ Rainey, PhD. <http://www.christiancoachingcenter.org/index/php/russ-rainey/coachingchurch2/>. Accessed April 11, 2011.

The problem with this strategy is that it allows churches to take the easy path and to replicate the mainstream, even when the mainstream does not connect with the local setting. Hirsch states,

We have so programmed out of our callings that it is generally hard for us to think and act differently than what we have for hundreds of years and not to persecute people who try to trailblaze alternative ways...we are perfectly designed to achieve what we are currently achieving.³³

He goes on to remind us that the church formed by Jesus Christ was made for great impact on the world, and was a movement of the people.³⁴ The American church has become a proscribed moment of denominational dominance that is full of structural mandates, rules, and boundaries.

For example, when a United Methodist local church decides to support a local or international mission outreach, it is rewarded if that mission is from the same denomination, and it is ignored, or worse, punished, if it is a Christian program from a different Christian family line. One example of this behavior is when the amount billed to each church to pay into the greater United Methodist Church, called “apportionments,” is *less* when giving to Methodist missions and *more* when giving to non-Methodist mission outreach. If a United Methodist local church continues to sponsor and support a non-UMC missional venture, eventually the systemic bosses will question whether that local church is truly UMC. The UMC declares it’s allegiance to the ecumenical work of the church, but it does not provide action to back up its words.

Another trait in the programmatic denominational structures is the professionalization of the clergy. The unintended outcome of this advancement is a division between the collar and the hands and feet of Christ. This clergy-laity split has

³³ Hirsch and Ford, 30.

³⁴ Hirsch and Ford, 31.

come about with strict lines of demarcation around mandates of Christ to baptize, to provide communion, and to make disciples. Historical and structural chords of the ages devalued the ministry of all people, and excised the ability of the church to be led by the Holy Spirit, which includes leadership among the laity. Instead, those who have been through specific educational programs are the only ones given proper authority to lead the church and to lead spiritual groups. In the Methodist church specifically, this is a vast turning from the beginnings when lay leaders and lay pastors provided pastoral leadership, provided sacraments, and were given authority at the same time that they were learning about the scriptures, the theology, and the Methodist way of life. Francis Asbury, the declared leader of the American group of Methodists, traveled extensively and found groups and leaders that had ignited everywhere. Wigger states Asbury allowed the movement, and the people, to lead the way, instead of focusing on the minutia of problems:

Asbury spent much of the next several months shoring up the organizational structure of Maryland Methodism. As he preached his way across the state, he met and ‘regulated’ class meetings wherever he could, examining them to insure that they maintained disciplinary standards. Whenever he could, he formed new classes and bands.³⁵

The great movement of Methodism was a wild, unfettered, fast-moving, organic crusade in motion. The original American Methodists would no more think of taming it than they would think of taming a wild Mustang. Instead, they ran along side of the movement, and added structure and support where possible. Today, the movement has been tamed into submission and its original beauty and fire is barely visible in many places.

³⁵ John Wigger, *American Saint, Francis Asbury & The Methodists* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

Programmatic churches are also centered on committee meetings. The best leaders are placed in charge of committees where they spend hours in church politics instead of doing the work of the church. Lencioni states that meetings are boring and ineffective in most situations.³⁶ At one church, the pastor arrived to find that the bell tower needed to be lit. When questioning the leaders about the history of the bell tower, she learned that previously a committee had formed to work on the lighting problem. A group of engineers and other committed members met together for about a year, but the plan they came up with had a light that was so bright it reportedly would have needed clearance for aircraft control, and it was extremely expensive. Unable to solve the problem, the committee dropped the project. The new pastor contacted an individual in the church who agreed to fund the lighting project, and called a landscaping company. They lit the bell tower for a small fee and it was completed in two weeks. Committee work is not the work of disciple-making.

Churches formed on committees find that politics, and the time it takes for consensus to occur, stymie the potential for advancement. In the typical United Methodist Church, a project is introduced by a committee, and then approved by the finance committee, or other committee that needs prior buy-in, and finally, it is taken to the Church Council for final approval before implementation begins. This process is cumbersome, and moves many good leaders out of the arena of the church. After facing politics and structural demands at work, most laity are unwilling to deal with the politics of a structure at church. And so they back out of leadership roles.

It doesn't have to be this way. David Arruda, pastor at Faith Fellowship UMC in Mansfield, Massachusetts, leads a small church of fifty to sixty members. This small

³⁶ Patrick Lencioni, *Death by Meeting* (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 223.

congregation was given permission to begin and implement ministries. Because of the permission-giving attitude of the pastor, the church is involved in thirty-nine ministries. One ministry collects truckloads of clothing and delivers it to the homeless in other churches throughout the country. Another woman, who regularly read the obituaries in the newspaper, became homebound. She then began to write caring notes to all the families of those who had died in her community, sharing the love of Christ with neighbors and strangers alike. Unfortunately, most programmatic churches are not free to go beyond the boundaries of established protocol. Unfortunately, many pastors are worried about getting in trouble with the structure, and are unwilling to give permission freely and liberally. The need for control douses water on the fire of passion for ministry in the world.

Kimball finds people dream of a church that is less programmed and that provides time for spiritual connectors like prayer and contemplation.³⁷ He notes the exodus of young members when this is not provided:

I've had numerous conversations with younger people who told me they left their church to be a disciple of Jesus in a way that makes sense to them. They aren't abandoning their faith. Many choose to form small communities and meet in homes among friends. They are waiting for the larger, more organized church to change. This is no cop-out, either.³⁸

Youth are leaving the church because the delivery of the gospel does not connect with their culture, their language, or their soul. Programmed denominational communities that have allowed the routinization of the sacred become a place of disconnectedness for the greater culture. And because of this, the mainline denominational churches are declining en masse.

³⁷ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not The Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1997), 225.

³⁸ Alan Hirsch, *Emerging Worship, Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), xii.

The Emergent and Missional Movements

The buzzwords of those studying church development today are “emerging church” and “missional church.” Most conferences are focused on being “emerging” or “missional” in order to sign up eager pastors and church leaders. Multiple books are being written around these themes; and the titles “missional” and “emerging” are being given as the new movement in Christianity.

The Emerging Church is related to emergence theory, which portrays that “complex systems develop from the bottom up.”³⁹ This descriptor of the church recognizes that systematic problems and goals are more complex than acknowledged and cannot be boxed in to top-down goal-setting, strategic-plans, and dash-board accounting programs. It is a recognition of the world or organisms, and applying the theory to organizations, including the organization of the church. In the emerging church paradigm, there is less structure, more networking, more natural growth, and less systemic control. It is the church following where Jesus is going, instead of following a structure that boxes in the methods for making disciples of Jesus Christ. It is marked by a sense of freedom, messiness, and free-reign as this group of churches seeks to meet the world in a fresh way.

Missional Church, on the other hand, is simply a “church that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose as an agent of God’s mission to the world.”⁴⁰ It stays focused on making disciples of Jesus and on transformation of the world. Frost and

³⁹ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways, reactivating the missional church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Brazos Press, 2006), 279.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 285.

Hirsch, in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, define the Missional Church with these characteristics:

- a) *The missional church is incarnational, not attractional, in its ecclesiology.*
- b) *The missional church is messianic, not dualistic, in its spirituality.*
- c) *The missional church adopts an apostolic, rather than a hierarchical, mode of leadership.*⁴¹

The missional church focuses on being *sent*, on following Jesus Christ, and on embodying the gospel with hands and feet that show the actions of love. Those who follow in this vein, would propose that the denominational church has faltered in following the original mission of Christ, and that it is time to turn this around and regain the core focus and value of the church. McLaren relates this through the words of a Burundian woman, Justine:

“I’m ok, but I’m shaken up. I don’t know if anyone else here sees it, but I do. I see it. Today, for the first time, I see what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. I see that it’s about changing this world, not just escaping it and retreating into our churches. If Jesus’ message of the kingdom of God is true, then everything must change. Everything must change.”⁴²

When the church is not hitting the mark, and when the world recognizes that the kingdom of God is not coming via the agent of the status quo church setting, then disruption occurs and allows for the voices of discontent to rise to the top. McLaren notes that,

...religion, even the religion we are committed to and in which we have found God and purpose and meaning and truth, can become captive to a colossal distortion. It can become a benign and passive chaplaincy to a failing and dysfunctional culture, the religious public relations department for an inadequate and destructive ideology. It can forego being a force of liberation and transformation and instead become a source of domestication, resignation, pacification, and distraction.⁴³

⁴¹ Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch, 12.

⁴² Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change, Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 23.

⁴³ *ibid*, 29.

The people have voiced their concern and many have voted with their absence. Kimball states that the problem with the church in connecting to today's culture is that it is not seen as the place to go to connect spiritually, and in fact is the last place many will turn to for connection with God.⁴⁴ If this is true, and the majority of culture will not turn to the church for spiritual sustenance, then what has the church become about? Is it a social club, or a moral guidance post, or a comfortable museum to tradition?

The prophets of this day are calling for a new understanding, a new way of being, and a new focus of transformation. Burke recognizes that we must emerge as a church.

As I see it, we have at least two choices as Christians living in a postmodern world. We can learn to walk in new, different ways for the sake of the gospel. Or we can step out of the baptismal tank and cheer others on in their journey. But we have to do something...⁴⁵

Burke recognizes that the church will rise up somewhere, and it is the task of the day to join in the new thing and support the movement of God, or at the very least, to get out of the way.

Kimball reminds the church that the question that needs to be asked is, "Do the emerging worship gatherings we create produce disciples or consumers?"⁴⁶ Consumer Boomer churches are being criticized as cultural reflections of status quo, rather than transformational avenues for the counter-culture of discipleship. Will emerging worshipping communities stumble over the same step?

⁴⁴ Dan Kimball, 75.

⁴⁵ Stephen Burke, *Making Sense of Church, Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), 167.

⁴⁶ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 230.

On the sideline of the emerging movement, which Tickle reports will encompass sixty percent of Christianity at its maturity,⁴⁷ are the other 30% of the churches that have maintained some sense of connection to the former church. She lists these churches in four categories:

1. Traditionalist: those who act as gradual change agents
2. Re-Traditionalists: those who work to make inherited church most like its original nature
3. Progressives: those who stay with inherited communion but work to connect them with ideals of the post-modern world
4. Hyphenateds: those who bring two worlds together, such as “Presby-mergents, Metho-mergents, Luther-mergents, etc.”⁴⁸

She goes on to state her belief that “The Hyphenated Church will be the largest group among church cultures.”⁴⁹ Another form of “hyphenateds” are members of churches who have a spiritual connection to more than one denomination. For example, this author grew up Lutheran and now is Methodist, and often refers to herself as “Lutho-dist” or “Meth-eran.” In congregations it is evident that many people of other denominations, both Catholic and Protestant are spiritually bi-denominational. These communities of faith listed by Tickle are transforming but are not in the center of the emergent and missional movements. In other words, they are affected by the greater change occurring around them, but they make choices about what must change and what must remain the same.

Hirsch wrestles with these two developments, and combines the descriptor, by renaming the “Emerging Missional Church” as one that combines the factors of *emerging*

⁴⁷ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence, How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2008), 139.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 140-142.

⁴⁹ The Ooze, evolving spirituality.beta. Spencer Burke. “Phyllis Tickle – Beyond Denominations, the Hyphenated Church”. <http://theooze.com/featured/phyllis-tickle-beyond-denominations-the-hyphenated-church/> Accessed 11-2-11.

and *missional*.⁵⁰ The two categories of *emerging* and *missional* have faded together as they began to work on the same problem and propose similar responses. The emerging-missional church responds to the failure of the church with a new, or perhaps better said, an old, vision of hope for the present and future, that of transformation of the world from the bottom up. The emerging missional movement is well on its way to being a major change agent.

The Call to Action of The United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church took serious note of the problem of decline and the possibility of transformation in the 1990's, and implemented a study and strategic plan, "The Call to Action". The Council of Bishops called for an independent consulting firm to study The United Methodist Church in the United States, and to determine the state of the church. They also invited a different independent consulting firm to address ways to turn around the American church and move forward toward growth and health. The study on the current state is called "The United Methodist Church Operational Assessment Project, Executive Summary Presentation"⁵¹ The overall structure, which includes boards and agencies, as well as the Council of Bishops, were seen as top-heavy:

The support structure of the U.S. Church has been precipitously turned on its head; we have fewer failing to support more. The Church simply cannot afford to support itself for much longer without drastic change.⁵²

The call for systemic change is the most difficult change of all. It requires recognizing that a top-heavy system will topple over with the slightest storm, and acknowledging that the wind has not only begun, but is in full force. Because of this study, it is evident that

⁵⁰ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 280.

⁵¹ Prepared by APEX HG LLC, <http://www.umc.org>. June 29, 2010.

⁵² *The United Methodist Operational Assessment Project, Executive Summary*, 25.

action must begin now to slim down the top-heavy agencies, boards, and Bishops structure, and to focus their goals on supporting the mission of making disciples at the level of the local church. Currently the local church is prevented from putting its resources in mission and in disciple-making because of the high cost of supporting the structure. The church I serve, for example, pays 20% of its income to the structure through apportionments. Local churches are typically facing cuts in spending on local ventures because of this high systemic cost.

And the cost of the local churches supporting the structure is not just financial. After returning from renewal leave, I came back to the church and set aside a day to answer and catch up on emails. I noticed that many of the emails were from the national offices, or the conference office, requesting information and time commitments from the local church or the local pastor. Because I had been gone for a few weeks, it was even more apparent that the continual requests from the structure swallowed up much of the pastoral time commitments, and this time could be better used on the ground of ministry in the local setting. It was obvious that the local church was handholding the structure, when a healthy organization is one where the structure is supportive of the body.

The local church, in the study, fared slightly better at making disciples. The study showed that while the local church was the best place to make disciples, the decline in actual baptisms and members was astonishing. It also pointed out that too much money was being spent on clergy and Episcopal salaries, and maintenance of buildings. Furthermore, the church is embroiled in internal conflicts. The study reported that while local churches are the central place for making disciples, they are unsupported by a structure that is more concerned with the continuation of the system than the mission of

making disciples.⁵³ The load on the clergy and the local church has taken its toll, draining energy from pastors, churches, and the core activity of discipleship making. The structural system for local churches is not strong, as most boards and agencies are failing to be supportive and encouraging.

The proposed way forward was studied and reported by Towers Watson. They determined that churches needed to be “vital,” defining “vital churches” as those who have these characteristics:

- Both traditional and contemporary worship services
- Multiple small groups
- Programs for youth and children
- Led by pastors who are excellent in preaching and planning
- Lay Leadership is emphasized⁵⁴

According to this report, these factors are present when churches are experiencing vitality, and so they proposed that churches work on implementing the above characteristics in their communities, which would therefore bring about vitality.

In other words, the answer to the major decline and near-death (or suspended death) of the denomination is given as creating vitality through a list of programs and characteristics. This response falls woefully short. The clarion call for transformation is certainly needed, but the answer to the problem is deeper than a programmatic or numeric shift. This is merely circular thinking that focuses on what worked in the past. This “more of the same” answer will not move the Church forward.

The change needed in The United Methodist Church is foundational, and even more drastic than what is proposed by programmatic, linear thinking. The study seems

⁵³ *The United Methodist Operational Assessment Project*, APEX HG LLC, 168.

⁵⁴ *Call to Action, Vital Congregations Research Project*, Towers Watson, 2010.

way off the mark, focusing on numerical outcomes instead of finding the heart of the current problem. Friedman, who studies leadership and systemic change, states:

The ultimate irony of societal regression, however is that eventually it co-opts the very institutions that train and support the leaders who could pull a society out of its devolution. It does this by concentrating their focus on data and technique rather than on emotional process and the leaders own self. These always go hand-in-hand. One result is erosion of the individuation necessary for well-defined leadership to arise or express itself. Another result is that parents and presidents then fail to recognize that in shaping of any institution, emotional processes are more powerful than the nature of its structure or makeup.⁵⁵

More than the emotion component, which is missing in this study, there is for the Church, a spiritual nature and nurture that must be addressed. How can the church address its decline in the same way that a business might, when the church's goals are unrelated to the business world? That a study can be done without mentioning the spiritual changes that must be made is skirting around the center of the problem. Friedman states,

The focus on data and technique is itself a character of emotional regression: namely, avoidance or denial of the fact that it is happening.⁵⁶

The obvious move toward fixating on programmatic changes in lieu of looking at the heart of the problem has cost the United Methodist Church greatly.

It doesn't have to be this way. David Arruda, pastor at Faith Fellowship UMC in Mansfield, Massachusetts, leads a small church of fifty to sixty members. This small congregation was given permission to begin and implement ministries. Because of the permission-giving attitude of the pastor, the church is involved in thirty-nine ministries. One ministry collects truckloads of clothing and delivers it to the homeless in other churches throughout the country. Another woman, who regularly read the obituaries in the newspaper, became homebound. She then began to write caring notes to all the

⁵⁵ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 55.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 55.

families of those who had died in her community, sharing the love of Christ with neighbors and strangers alike. Unfortunately, most programmatic churches are not free to go beyond the boundaries of established protocol. Unfortunately, many pastors are worried about getting in trouble with the structure, and are unwilling to give permission freely and liberally. The need for control douses water on the fire of passion for ministry in the world. The Call to Action is an attempt to do the very same thing that happens after a genius show car is created. It is a venue of risk aversion that prevents recreating the original genius of the Methodist movement, and instead is providing a succession of programmatic changes that are sequential, methodical, and attainable. The problem is, it is incredibly boring and does not live up to the call of God on the people known as Methodists. The original “method” of the Methodists was a spiritual action for making disciples of Christ, but the current “method” proposed is to count and report the programs, creating a national register for comparison. The study’s answer to the problem of the church falls so short of what it means to be a church of Christ, that it is cry able.

The institution of the UMC has yielded the local church ineffective by binding and constraining the life out of the local setting. And this “answer” to the UMC problem, the “The Call to Action,” is truly an example of the very problem it seeks to address.

Hirsch notes,

...God’s people are more potent by far when they have little of what we would recognize as church institution in their life together...it seems that over time the increasingly impersonal structures of the institution assume roles, responsibilities, and authority that legitimately belong to the whole people of God in their local and grassroots expressions. It is at this point that things tend to go awry.⁵⁷

Peterson’s comment about the state of the greater church is an apt description of the response of “The Call to Action.” He reminds the Church,

⁵⁷ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 23.

Prominent among the contributing factors to being ‘lost in the cosmos’ is the rampant secularizing debasement of language into depersonalized facts, with a corresponding evisceration of imagination into cardboard cutouts of roles and functions. We live in a language world in which every ‘you’ gets neutered into an ‘it’ and imagination is crowded to the sidelines by numbers.⁵⁸

The idea of “The Call to Action” was a bold and necessary step. However, the final study proposals are unimaginative, uncreative, and dispassionate for the resurrection life of the local church. Rendle describes the problem this way,

Congregational and middle judicatory leaders in mainline denominations have expressed their concern that as the need for new ideas and new structures increases within their denominations, the primary response of national offices and national denominational staff people has been to request more reports and increased compliance (that is, additional regulation). The need to control and regulate has the tendency to make change more difficult without adding any agreement or coordination to the efforts of change.⁵⁹

The greatest difficulty in calling for change is allowing for change. The knee-jerk reaction to control future events has hindered the ability of the Church to transform.

The Church, feeling the need for change, has gone through waves of trial-and-error transitions. They include the broader responses of the church growth movement, the programmatic denominational church, and the emerging and missional movements. The more specific response of The United Methodist Church, The Call to Action, has also been proposed as the solution to a dying church. Death, however, cannot be counteracted by proposing new ways of life, but rather, by leaning into the fullness of the grave. The Christian response to death is to remember that it is necessary in order to encounter resurrection. As this death is embraced, then the simple, methodical structure of

⁵⁸ Peterson, Eugene. *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 55.

⁵⁹ Gil Rendle, *Journey in the Wilderness, New Life for Mainline Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 70.

discipleship can be implemented, and the church can invite the creative, maverick leaders on the edge of the system to rise up and become a new body in Christ.

SECTION FOUR:

THESIS

THESIS

At this crucial crossroad, the Church must move forward into the new possibilities of life. But first, the Church must accept death, the places where She has already died, as well as the places where death must be allowed to happen. Then the Church must provide for a simple structure to support the new movement. This new movement of making disciples for Jesus Christ will be based on the methodical plan of John Wesley to gather groups of people who go deep in their commitment to God and each other. This church transformation will be revolutionary and insurgent. And finally, this new way of being Church will include the Creative and the Maverick forms of rebirth. These places of rebirth will occur at the edges of the Church.

Death and Resurrection.

When a system is in the process of dying, it fights to live. But there are times when a system, especially a church, must allow for death. This is one of those times in history. Phyllis Tickle points out that Bishop Dyer has shown the structures of the institution called “Christianity” die and reform, every five hundred years.⁶⁰ The Great Reformation of the 16th century, also called the Protestant Reformation, was the last great change. This means the Church is now, in the 21st century, in the middle of the next great transformation.⁶¹ The experience of death is what the Church is fighting against, however it is what She must lean into in order to live again.

The central story of the Christian faith is the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus himself gave in to death so that new life in the Holy Spirit

⁶⁰ Phyllis Tickle, Location 177-87.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, location 194-202.

could be available for everyone. While we love to focus on the *resurrection* part of the story, resurrection does not happen without a death experience. The Scripture says it this way,

Look, fool! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn't come back to life unless it dies. What you put into the ground doesn't have the shape that it will have, but it's a bare grain of wheat or some other seed. God gives it the sort of shape that he chooses, and he gives each of the seeds its own shape.⁶²

The grasp for life is natural, and has been going on ever since the disciples argued with Jesus that he himself could not die. The call for life always fights the call for death.

However this is the time the church must fully understand and lean into the gift of death.

Andrew Root writes "God knows death from the inside."⁶³ God experienced death when Jesus died. God knows the pain, the agony, and the hopelessness. God even knows the reason the Church fights against death. But Root reminds the church that,

*God works life out of death; God brings possibility out of nothingness.*⁶⁴

So while death is the ultimate yielding, it is also the ultimate hope. Eugene Peterson states,

The practice of resurrection is not an attack on the world of death; it is a nonviolent embrace of life in the country of death. It is an open invitation to live eternity in time.⁶⁵

This is the most difficult concept for the Church, or for any person, to grasp. While resurrection conquers death in one sense, in another it gives in to death. For it is in death that life rises up.

⁶² I Corinthians 15:36-3, (*Common English Bible*).

⁶³ Andrew Root, *The Promise of Despair, The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 87.

⁶⁴ *ibid*, 87.

⁶⁵ Peterson, 13.

Imagine that a newcomer visits a church and she slips in quietly in the back row, sitting on a pew that wobbles with instability as she sits down. She notices that the building is big enough to fit four hundred people, but there are about fifty souls in this congregation. And she notices that she is the only one that does not have gray hair. The hymns have a shadow of beauty that is drowned out by the old organ and the architecture that both swallows up the sound and causes weird reverberations. The liturgy is read with a cadence that is so slow and monotone that her eyelids begin to droop. After the long and rather boring service ends, the people greet her warmly and hope that she'll come back again, but she leaves this place wondering if they even know they are dying. She wonders if the Church has noticed its lack of youth and its 1960's décor and, even worse, it's 1960's smell of mustiness and days gone by. In this setting, a courageous church would find a way to acknowledge death, and look for a way for God to lead them into rebirth. As Peterson reminds us,

The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection life, life out of death, life that trumps death, life that is the last word, Jesus life.⁶⁶

In this quote, it is the tendency of the reader to focus on the words "life" and to ignore the word "death." But the two are related; they are family; and, like it or not, they always go together. There is no resurrection without trusting in the process of death.

And yet the Church continues to fight Her central story, spending decades and dollars on programs that would bring revitalization to the dying system, even when that spending of time, effort, and money was to no avail. The Church is in the process of dying, if not already dead. It has already happened. Now is the time for acceptance and a burial of what once was. The death of a local church, or a local manifestation of the

⁶⁶ Eugene Peterson, 12.

church, is not the death of the gospel. It is only a structural, formal, format death. It is not the death of faith in Jesus Christ. But it is a death that must be recognized in order for life to come again.

Deaths have occurred before. The music industry died when it failed to recognize that the world and medium of communication had changed. It died for lack of imagination around financing.⁶⁷ While the world moved forward, the musical artists initially remained in the past, fighting the move from recorded royalties to Internet sharing. Godin states that it took a decade for the industry to crumble, and the reasons are simply,

1. Music industry executives didn't have the heretic they needed. No one stood up and made change happen.
2. They forgot to embrace their tribe.⁶⁸

But the artists were eventually driven to share their music, and in the end they began to accept new mediums for their fan base, providing their music, their primary love, to the world once again.⁶⁹ Something died. And something was reborn.

Martin Luther, the rebel priest who despaired of the status quo of the church in his day, was willing to risk it all (his priesthood, his calling, his paycheck) in order that the scriptures could be made available to the commoner. He utilized an old form of communication, the paper and pen, to write his complaints and nail them to the church door. And then he utilized a new form of communication, the printing press, to spread the news and complaints throughout the known world. As the word spread, the old way of keeping the scripture locked up for clergy alone was replaced by pocketbook

⁶⁷ Seth Godin, *Tribes, We Need You to Lead Us* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 92.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 92.

⁶⁹ ibid, 92-96.

pamphlets that stirred revival and pocket book scriptures that stirred the soul.⁷⁰ The revolution spread because of a communication invention called “the printing press,” and the revolution spread because of the courage of an individual to speak out. Shirkey states,

Two things are true about the remaking of the European intellectual landscape during the Protestant Reformation: first it was not caused by the invention of movable type, and second, it was possible only after the invention of movable type, which aided the rapid dissemination of Martin Luther’s complaints about the Catholic Church (the 95 Theses) and the spread of Bibles printed in local languages, among its other effects.⁷¹

The abuses of the Church were unveiled for the world to see, thanks to an invention, and thanks to a “heretic,” and the correction of rebirth began. Shirkey calls this breakthrough “mass amateurization,”⁷² which allows for change to be implemented by the non-professionals, the amateurs, and the people on the outskirts of power structures.⁷³

Something new was born after something old died.

Communication methods are in transition once again. Shirky observes,

The basic capabilities of tools like Flickr reverse the old order of group activity, transforming ‘gather, then share’ into ‘share, then gather.’ People were able to connect after discovering one another through their photos.⁷⁴

In most instances, the church is still operating out of the gather, print a bulletin, sing from a hymnbook, and mail out a newsletter, information system. This old format is occurring while the world is gathering in cyberspace and sharing information way before it gathers in public and personal formations. Shirky continues to provide understanding of the significant changes in society when he notes,

⁷⁰ “Martin Luther, The Reluctant Revolutionary.” PBS Arts Fall Festival, (Devillier Donegan Enterprises, 2003) www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/index.html. Accessed December 1, 2011.

⁷¹ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 67.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Shirky, 70-80.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 36.

Now that it is possible to achieve large-scale coordination at low cost, a third category has emerged: serious, complex work, taken on without institutional direction. Loosely coordinated groups can now achieve things that were previously out of reach for any other organizational structure...⁷⁵

While there is a need for some structure, that need has lessened greatly as anyone can gather a group of people for worship or for study of the Bible...and they can do it without any institutional authority. Some worshippers are gathering on the Internet through venues such as “Second Life.”⁷⁶ Perhaps what has not yet been recognized is that while local church buildings are emptying out, Internet worshipping communities are growing.

John Wesley also saw the places where the institutionalized Church was dying, the places where the message was unspoken. He leaned into the dwindling places, instead of the successful sanctuaries, and ministered to those in society who did not interact in places of respectability. In other words, he went to the non-successful, non-powerful, non-famous people. Wigger states,

Methodism was both driven and constrained primarily by the needs, hopes, and fears of ordinary people, and almost entirely conducted by those from the middling and lower orders of society.⁷⁷

He began to form a discipleship method that connected people with God and with each other through small gatherings. These societies and class meetings caught and spread throughout society and even to the new America. Wigger describes the primary meetings in frontier America, stating that,

By 1785 only 60 Methodist chapels had been purchased or built, but there were more than 800 recognized preaching places. Before the proliferation of Methodist church buildings, meetings were held in homes (where the majority of weekday

⁷⁵ *ibid*, 47.

⁷⁶ www.secondlife.com.

⁷⁷ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm, Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 5.

sermons were delivered), court houses, school houses, the meetinghouses of other denominations, barns or in the open.⁷⁸

Even ballrooms and taverns were occasionally utilized for worship and class meetings.⁷⁹

These gatherings were the discipleship method, and people gathered to be accountable to their community in faith. It was not a policing group, but rather a place for encouragement in the faith. Wesley was not looking to create a new form of church, but he was looking for the experience of God to be made real in his day. Community faith, led by both laity and clergy, was the new norm.⁸⁰

Wesley's focus on community was evident even in the little things. For example, he created a pew in his first, and only church, at the end of his life. This pew was formed with the back on a hinge so that it could be moved to the other side of the seat as people turned and faced each other for lively discussions at class meetings and after the sermon.⁸¹ This was a death for the staid, proper, traditional Church of England. Something major was born after a group of people left the old way and followed the new way. Methodist history is full of stories of resurrection that rises out of death.

Scripture also is full of stories of death and resurrection. For example, Ezekiel is asked to prophecy to a valley of dead bones, speaking these words:

Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.⁸²

God explains to Ezekiel that these bones are the House of Israel, which is Ezekiel's current faith community. They were dry and without hope and they had no life left in

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 37.

⁸⁰ Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Oxford, England: Lion Publishing Plc., 2003).

⁸¹ A visit to London, England, Wesley Chapel, Summer, 2005.

⁸² Ezekiel 37:4b-6, (*Common English Bible*).

them. But God reminds Ezekiel that God is able to open up even the graves so that life can be found again. And God says to him, “I’ve spoken, and I will do it.”⁸³ The church of today is like the dry bones, and in some cases, the very graves of Ezekiel’s vision. Dry, brittle, and without the breath of the Holy Spirit, the church is paralyzed unto death. Some are speaking to the bones and calling forth life out of death. As they speak what God commands, life will rise up again in the House of God. And the company of those who follow after God will be vast enough to transform the world.

The Scripture also tells a story of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, who died. Jesus knows that Lazarus has died, and he prepares to go to him. Jesus knew the miracle that was coming was a miracle of life out of death, and he allows the death to occur, he doesn’t prevent it, so that the miracle can give glory to God. By the time they arrive in Bethany, Lazarus has been dead and buried in the tomb for four days. Mary and Martha were in full grieving mode. The family and friends were gathered around. The services had already been performed. And Jesus missed it all.

In a saddened state, Jesus came to the tomb and told the people to remove the stone at the entrance. Martha, mortified, reminds Jesus that her brother has been in the tomb so long that he now stinks. Jesus reminds Martha that he was doing this for the glory of God. Jesus prays, and then calls out for Lazarus to come alive. And he did! Tied up, covered over, and stinking, Lazarus hobbled out of the grave. The community ran to Lazarus, crying and amazed and speechless, they untied him from the bindings of death.

When the church is in a place of death, the rising up into resurrection will come so that God’s magnificence can be seen. At different periods in history, the church dies

⁸³ Ezekiel 37:14b, (*Common English Bible*).

and goes to the grave, but even here, God can call it out of the stinking places, the bound places, and the tight spaces. Just when the church despairs of any hope of life, God can still show up and bring about life-after-death-life. That kind of life is the one that is so amazing the whole world takes notice, spreads the news, and take part in the unbinding ritual.

The Scripture also tells another story of death and resurrection. This story is the core narrative of Christianity. It is found in all four Gospels. In John 19 and 20, the crucifixion occurs while Jesus' mother, aunt, and Mary Magdalene stand by. One of the last things Jesus does for his mother is give her another son, John the beloved, as a "son" who will watch over her in his absence. He has been tortured and broken, and hanging on the cross, he breathes his last breath, saying,

*It is completed.*⁸⁴

Jesus' body is removed, wrapped in burial cloths, and placed in a tomb.

The next morning Mary Magdalene visits the grave and finds that the stone has been removed. She runs to tell Simon Peter and the One Jesus Loved, thinking they have taken Jesus' body. But, running back they look closer, and see that the linen burial cloths are lying on the ground, and when they went inside the tomb, the One Jesus Loved believed that he had risen from the dead. But Mary and Simon Peter were full of questions.

As Mary lingers outside the tomb in disbelief, Jesus appears to her. But, she thinks he is the Gardener, until he whispers her name, "Mary!" Suddenly she knows that Jesus has risen from the dead. She runs to tell the disciples. And later, as the disciples

⁸⁴ John 19:30, (*Common English Bible*).

were hiding out together out of fear and disbelief, Jesus comes to them also. He tells them to be at peace, and he breathes the Holy Spirit on them.

The gospel story leaves much to the imagination. We don't know the words that were said by the disciples. They probably shouted out loud, and danced for joy, and some were frozen in shock, and others must have fainted right out. The Scripture doesn't describe that part. But whatever happened in that room was so powerful that the whole world came to know about a Savior, named Jesus of Nazareth.

This central story is the Church's greatest hope. Since the core narrative is one of death and resurrection, the Church can be at peace. The Holy Spirit will be breathed into the dying places and the women and the men will testify of the good news for the whole world.

Today, prophetic voices are rising up and speaking to the Church. Shane Claiborne, for example, challenges the status quo:

We just need imagination and courage. We need to insist on not settling for anything short of the politics of the cross and the kingdom of our God.⁸⁵

The politics of the Church have been about structural power plays, and not about the cross of Christ. The status of the church has become stagnated unto death, and the stench is not pretty. The kingdom of God is alive and well in the world, but the church is not fully living out its kingdom principles.

The central story of death and resurrection is the story that must be embraced and lived in this time. The United Methodist Church has some dying to do. It must die to a top-heavy structure that is a burden to the local churches. It must die to a hierarchy that prevents movement and creativity. It must die to the expensive and time-consuming

⁸⁵ Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2008), 335.

training for pastors at a time when culture is dying without hearing the good news. It must die to the power of itinerate and pensions system. The UMC is bleeding out, and now it must face its death and call for the new life that God will bring. Simple supportive structures provide the venue for that new life.

Simple Supportive Structure.

Some structure is necessary for strength and stability and for growth. A body without bones won't walk very far. But the structure of the United Methodist Church has become calcified and so burdensome it inhibits any creative life that could spring forth. Bishop Wilke writes of a conversation with Lyle Schaller, who believes the churches' current structure is a pay-off for numerical decline, where subsidies go to those who are not growing or thriving, as well as being a punishment for growth. He also believes it is a system that promotes a standard of short-term appointments, which prohibits growth.⁸⁶ This is an example of bone calcification...building up to create a stiffness that promotes brokenness. Wilke states that we have forgotten that the call is not to run a church, but to save the world.⁸⁷

An exterior semiotic of the growing structural burden exists in the size of the rulebook, called *The Discipline*. In 1924 it was a small pocket-style book (4"X6") with 800 pages. The 2008 edition is about the same number of pages (857) but is much larger (6 ½"X9 ½"). The structure, as seen by number of words, has almost doubled in complexity. Today pastors in the Methodist tradition are searching for answers to their

⁸⁶ Richard B. Wilke, *And Are We Yet Alive?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 61.

⁸⁷ *ibid*, 121.

problems in *The Discipline* instead of seeking after the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of the community.

While the structure is overly burdensome, it is crucial to not “throw out the baby with the bath water.” Methodist history has a story and a structure that could be re-imagined even in this day. Bruce Robbins looks at the need for structural transformation, stating,

Since 1928, speeches have been made at General Conference calling for change. For some good and bad reasons the church has chosen not to change. Yet today we reach a point of no choice. Our current infrastructure is unable to carry the weight of a truly just and sustainable ‘global church.’ We shall be unsatisfied with anything less. Now is the time to create a new structure for a global church.⁸⁸

Since the UMC structure is unsustainable, no longer can it plod forward making incremental changes every four years. The crisis must be dealt with now.

Rendle points out that the mainline denominations became more regulatory in response to the expansion of diverse viewpoints and needs. In order to maintain control, rules were formed. He states that this is a natural response for a system or organization to maintain, in fact, it is the easy, or the “economical” response.⁸⁹ He states,

When there are competing preferences or needs, it is much simpler and efficient to respond by saying, ‘Here are the rules.’⁹⁰

This, he says, is the response of order over the messiness of “deep change.”⁹¹ While this response is understandable, it is not healthy. In the end, order has shut down the ability to search for simpler, more fundamental means of maintaining structure for the sake of the mission.

⁸⁸ Bruce W. Robbins, *A World Parish? Hopes and Challenges of The United Methodist Church in a Global Setting* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 15.

⁸⁹ Gil Rendle *Journey in the Wilderness*, 69.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

The world itself is changing its view on structure. Gibbons reminds systems that, ...all around the world we're seeing a dramatic flattening of hierarchies and loosening of structures in significant domains and institutions, and moves toward decentralization that are common during seasons of innovation.⁹²

While the new way of operating in a global world is to flatten, loosen, and decentralize, the UMC has continued to build upon greater ladders of hierarchy, maintaining tight control and preventing potential for dramatic change.

However, history shows the original structure of the Methodists was simple and not controlling. Methodism began when a group of college students came together to hold each other accountable to growth as disciples of Jesus Christ. Wesley developed the Class Meeting, which are small groups, and the Societies, medium groups of around twelve, as a format to grow disciples. They would gather together and ask "How goes it with your soul?" They asked each other a set of questions about the working out of their faith that focused on tithing, attending worship, acts of mercy and kindness, and attending to Holy Communion.⁹³ These Class meetings gave birth to spiritual depth and holiness. When the group gathered to discuss their lives and their spiritual health, they also began to address the needs of their cities. The church pastors, both those who were trained and those who were not, gathered together with the lay leaders once a year to reinforce their understanding of the gospel, and to be accountable to the whole church and the whole world. The simple structure produced a sharing of the immense desire to live as if "the world is my parish."⁹⁴

⁹² Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish, Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 127.

⁹³ Thomas A Langford, *Practical Divinity, Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 14-15.

⁹⁴ Journal of John Wesley, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*. Calvin College. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iii.v.html>, Accessed June 15, 2011.

According to Wigger, the system in its infancy, was messy, even uncontrolled:

In many respects, the Methodist connection was a remarkably decentralized system. While American Methodism had a well-defined central hierarchy, the clergy never dominated the movement in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries...By creating so many avenues for lay men and women to participate in the church's leadership, American Methodism diffused much of the traditional tension between clergy and laity.⁹⁵

Today, the description above would be named, "organic." It allows for natural and sustainable growth, while recognizing that control is out-dated, unnecessary, and prohibitive to the mission. Today the clergy both dominate the United Methodist local churches, and are entrenched in the hierarchy. Today the structure forms the outcome instead of the mission forming the outcome. Without this decentralized simple structure, or "method," of discipleship that cares for the individual in community, the strength of the gospel message can be lost. The gospel is lost to shallow roots, hard soil, and to the winds of suffering.

The Methodist Church has replaced the *method* for making disciples with a *method* of structure, as worked out in *The Discipline*, the Annual Conference, and The General Conference. We have made our rules the method, instead of seeing the method as the way of spreading the gospel. We have replaced essence with structure. It is time to simplify the structure and focus on the disciple-making and world-changing core of living as a Christ-follower.

The Church Transformation

⁹⁵ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm, Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 27.

As the church lives into its death, it also lives into new life. Weems notes the importance of attending to the transformation:

*Traditions, including the Wesleyan tradition, do not continue without great care and struggle.*⁹⁶

When the church chooses to live into the struggle, there will be a new way to be the community of Christ. It will create a new rising and a new understanding. It will bring new connections to people seeking after God's love. This transformation will look different than anything the Church has known before. It will, perhaps, be unrecognizable to those who currently lead the church. But imagination is a faithful tool to lean into the future. The Church, as Elaine Heath imagines, is filled with this possibility:

However, something new is on the horizon—a breath of God that bears an uncanny resemblance to the original holiness movement. It is organic, humbling, hard to define, widespread, untamed, ecumenical, subversive, prophetic, and grass-roots. I believe a new holiness movement is in the process of being born;⁹⁷

The description Heath provides sounds much like the original, wild, untamed movement of the Methodists. Heath is describing a move of the spirit of God that brings us both back and forward; back to the original passion of the Methodists, and forward to the new way of spreading the gospel.

Godin states that this is an era where change comes from the bottom:

In an era of grassroots change, the top of the pyramid is too far away from where the action is to make much of a difference. It takes too long and it lacks impact. The top isn't the top anymore because the streets are where the action is.⁹⁸

This aptly describes what occurred with the original movement of the Methodists. It was grass-roots and untamed, even subversive. Today the people called Methodists are

⁹⁶ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., "Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit, 146.

⁹⁷ Elaine A. Heath, "The Emerging Holiness Movement," *Quarterly Review*, Volume 25, Number 2, Summer 2005, 118.

⁹⁸ Seth Godin, *Tribes*, 75.

making the change from the bottom, because the top is failing to allow for deep transformation. The difficulty of this picture provided by Godin, is its very unpredictability. The Church cannot structure the transformation in an easy, step-by-step methodical plan.

This kind of movement, like all movements, will involve the work of revolutionaries. A church revolutionary is one who is willing to risk all that is known and treasured in order to further the gospel. Revolutionaries are willing to love those whom Jesus loved: the marginalized and ignored pockets of humanity. As Loyd and Loyd state,

We are consciously tearing down the fortified walls of our church communities and spilling out into our neighborhoods to love and care for those less fortunate than us... We don't reach down to our fellow human beings but across. We are committed to rise to the challenge simply because, in good conscience, we can do no less. We are, after all, the hope of the world.⁹⁹

The focus on loving the margins of society necessitate that the community of Christ love them more than they love the comfortable center of the denominational structure. Chester and Timmis states,

The church is always tempted toward a church of glory, whether that takes the form of grand buildings, political influence, global structures, charismatic personalities, or megachurches. But an approach to the church consistent with the gospel of Christ crucified and discipleship shaped by that gospel is an ecclesiology of the cross. That means power in weakness, wisdom in folly, and glory in shame.¹⁰⁰

The challenge calls for a move away from what the church has become, and a move toward the church Jesus dreamed into existence.

⁹⁹ Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds. *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, "Our Report Card in the Year 2057" by Ken and Deborah Loyd, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 277.

¹⁰⁰ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church, A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008), 199.

Revolutionaries, even those willing to follow a Jesus insurgency, will pay a great cost. There will be a constant temptation to cease the work of revolution. It is immensely difficult to remain a revolutionary. McLaren reminds revolutionaries,

They would understand that at every moment, their identity as revolutionaries remains under assault; the gravity of compromise pulls and drags to hunch their backs, slacken their step, and lower their gaze. They would be on their guard for ways that they themselves could sabotage themselves—by becoming preoccupied with trivia, or by working from the system’s logic and values when trying to fight the system, or by slipping into dual narratives as the Pharisees and religious scholars in Jesus’ day did, or by substituting talk for action or activity for fruitfulness.¹⁰¹

But leaders who choose to be a part of the church transformation will continue to hold fast to the heart of the gospel, while letting go of the religious strangulations that appear to be part of the gospel. These are in reality, wolves in sheep’s clothing. Revolutionary leaders will have courageous backbone to stand for the truth that will set the church free.

This church revolution will happen as the church begins to understand the creative, right-brained movement. It will occur as it grows right-brained, creative, maverick churches. And, this change will happen on the edges of church society.

The Rise of the Creative Era.

The recent church has lived through two distinct eras: the industrial era and the information era. The industrial era occurred as society became organized to create objects. In this era, the church became organized, streamlined, efficient, and similar. The church became a Factory Church. One could attend a United Methodist Church anywhere in the states and encounter rituals, hymns, and preaching that were familiar. Rendle describes it this way,

¹⁰¹ Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 292.

Dykstra and Hudnut-Beumler point out that beginning in the 1830's through the 1860's, mainline denominations followed the dominant cultural pattern of organizations to structure themselves as corporations. Corporations have a commitment to orderliness and structure, to predictable decision making, and to the centralization of authority.¹⁰²

Rendle states that more rules were instituted to counter the chaotic change of the 1960's.¹⁰³ Rules, regulations, and sameness became the comfortable option to a changing world, a changing place in society, and a declining membership.

Then culture moved into the information era. In this era, technology rose to a height as information was passed on through new forms, like the Internet. Some churches tried to connect in this era, but most failed miserably and remained strongly connected to the industrial era. Wilson and Moore state,

Similarly, the twentieth century was about the gestation, birth, and development of a new era, with its own communication system.¹⁰⁴

These authors continue to point out that in the beginning of a changing era, the new tool, in this case media, is utilized to reinforce the previous era's status quo.¹⁰⁵ And so churches begin to utilize new tools, but do not fully embrace the new era. If a church kept up with culture, it put screens in the sanctuary, developed web sites, and utilized email and social media to connect. If a church embraced the new culture, it began to tell the story of the gospel in the digital story medium.

But now culture is being transformed by the creative era. Society has made a definite turn toward valuing the creative persons and venues. Florida describes this era by saying there is a new "Creative Class," that is the dominant force in the economy and

¹⁰² Gil Rendle, *Journey in the Wilderness, New Life for Mainline Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 69.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers, The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 14.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 15.

society. Florida states there are 38 million creative individuals in our country, and that they make up thirty percent of the workforce.¹⁰⁶ He goes on to say,

The Creative Class has the power, talent and numbers to play a big role in reshaping our world. Its members—in fact all of society—now have the opportunity to turn their introspection and soul-searching into real energy for broader renewal and transformation.¹⁰⁷

Florida also calls this creative class, “downright subversive, since it disrupts existing patterns of thought and life.”¹⁰⁸ If this class is about the reshaping that occurs when subversion is accepted in order for change to occur, then this is exactly what is needed to change large institutions like the church. Futurists state the trend of the tomorrow will show that creative knowledge is “the currency of the Innovation Economy.”¹⁰⁹ Canton also predicts that among the top jobs in 2020 will be poets, artists, and writers.¹¹⁰ In order for the church to connect with the culture of today, it must utilize the past technology of the information era, and it must engage the artists to communicate the gospel.

Artists are well known for giving a new-look to an old-understanding. They bring fresh eyes to the world and they tend to live outside of the lines and social demarcations. For that very reason, the artists among us can draw the way into the future life. If the Creative Class is crucial in bringing renewal and transformation, then surely the Church could partner with the artists to bring that renewal to the local settings. Art will be the new wineskin for the gospel. This leap should not be too difficult for the church since

¹⁰⁶ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class...and how it's transforming work, leisure, community & everyday life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), xxvii.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, xxix-xxx.

¹⁰⁸ Richard Florida, 31.

¹⁰⁹ James Canton, 48.

¹¹⁰ *ibid*, 111.

historically, during the times of the Renaissance, and the Romantic Period,¹¹¹ it has connected with artists. Remember the artwork that lights up the cathedrals of Europe, where the knowledge of art being a vehicle for the church is apparent. Being creative requires that beauty is virtuous. Garcia-Rivera describes this change for him personally:

I begin with the beautiful rather than the true or the good. Beauty, I have found, grasps complexity in a way no other starting point can match.¹¹²

This may be a large leap for a church that has centered on rules of right and wrong, and for a church that has allowed for the great divide between conservative and liberals to separate the body. But the focus on beauty, creativity, and even subversion, can be the way out of the current situation. Rory states,

Indeed, people are longing for God, and we artists can help point seekers to Him. I would not dispute the evangelistic potential of Spirit-led worship. Psalm 40:3 says that when we worship, it causes many others to turn to Christ. However, as one who has spent the majority of my ministry years in a seeker-driven church, I would plead for churches to consider using the arts also for strategic evangelism. The arts can play a major role in reaching the unchurched.¹¹³

The Church has been in need of the artists for some time now. Sample reminds the church,

It is no secret that those most influenced by electronic culture participate in church at far lower levels than those of previous generations.¹¹⁴

The culture that grew up with electronic medium utilizes images to communicate. Art can reach beyond the walls that have been built to keep away the culture. But those walls must now be shattered. It is time for the Church to become creative again.

¹¹¹ Rory Noland, *Thriving as an Artist in the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 14.

¹¹² Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God, A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), xi.

¹¹³ Rory Noland, *The Heart of the Artist* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan, 1999), 25.

¹¹⁴ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World, Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 15.

The Right-Brained World.

A sister concept to creativity is the theory around right-brained society. This idea is explained in great detail in the primary book, *The Master and His Emissary, The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, written by McGilchrist.¹¹⁵ In an interview about the theory proposed in the book, he describes the divided brain hemispheres:

In particular, the right hemisphere was capable of appreciating ambiguity, the implicit and the metaphorical, where the left hemisphere tended to require certainty, the explicit and the literal; the right hemisphere saw the broad context and the world as a seamless whole, interconnected within itself, where the left hemisphere focused on detail and produced a lot of separate fragments; the right hemisphere was far more capable of understanding new information, while the left hemisphere dealt with the already known; the right hemisphere saw individuals where the left hemisphere saw categories; the right hemisphere realized the importance of what is intuitive and embodied, where the left hemisphere prioritized abstraction and rationality (here I distinguish mere 'rationality' from the all-important, and far more complex, 'reason', to which both hemispheres need to contribute)).¹¹⁶

This description of the brain has been well documented, however McGilchrist takes the concepts further when he reminds scholars that in the Greek period of civilization, both the right and the left hemispheres were valued:

Hence Greek civilisation is marked by a need for an expansion in both what the right hemisphere does, and what the left hemisphere does. One of these, the right, led to pre-Socratic philosophy, the sense of individual justice, of moral virtue, mythology, mathematics, empirical science, the evolution of drama, music, and poetry rich in narrative, metaphor and humor; the other to the development of Plato's analytical philosophy, the codification of laws, military efficiency, the expansion of commerce, science in which theory came to predominate over empirical exploration, and in general the systematization of knowledge.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (London: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹¹⁶ *Frontier Psychiatrist*, "Interview with Iain McGilchrist," <http://frontierpsychiatrist.co.uk/interview-with-ian-mcgilchrist/> Accessed November 11, 2011.

¹¹⁷ *Frontier Psychiatrist*.

During this period, quick transformation of world understandings of nature and science are documented. The brains function together, however the right brain is the one that allows for growth, new information, and change.

Recent scientists have focused on a new understanding of the brain, and especially on the difference and connections between the right and the left brain. During the industrial and information eras, society formed itself around left-brained skills, but now right-brain traits are dominant. Daniel Pink describes it this way:

Today, the defining skills of the previous era—the ‘left brain’ capabilities that powered the Information Age—are necessary but no longer sufficient. And the capabilities we once disdained or thought frivolous—the ‘right-brain’ qualities of inventiveness, empathy, joyfulness, and meaning—increasingly will determine who flourishes and who flounders. For individuals, families, and organizations, professional success and personal fulfillment now require a whole new mind.¹¹⁸

This new mind changes everything.

In the creative era, the right brain dominates the understanding of life and society. The outcome of this change is radical. Yet the Church has not caught on. The church now lives in a time of right-brained dominance, and yet it is still operating out of a left-brained understanding of the world. The future is full of challenges, but also it is full of opportunities. When a church embraces creativity and right-brained ways of being, then it moves away from rules and structures and intuitively leans into following the lead of the Holy Spirit. And, it will not be the first time the church has been right-brained.

Wigger paints an intricate picture of the early Methodist movement as being inclusive of the artists and the creatives. He reports,

Methodist preachers of the early republic represented a distinct social class and came from remarkably similar backgrounds. Educationally and socially, these

¹¹⁸ Daniel H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind, Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 3.

preachers were cut from the same fabric as their predominantly middling and artisan audiences.¹¹⁹

Wigger further states,

The combination of a peripatetic artisan background and a deeply felt practice of piety created a potent mixture.¹²⁰

In other words, the church leaders reflected the culture at large, including the community of artists.

In order for the Church to be right-brained, its structures must become fluid, supportive, and creative. She must engage in risk-taking ventures as the core structural activity. She must engage in the culture with joy, with compassion, and with newness that brings a depth of understanding of the gospel in the world. Local churches can once again be the gathering places for artists, musicians, dancers, and free-thinkers. Coffee houses of creativity will locate themselves within the church in order for church to learn their ways. It is time for the church to embrace a right-brained mode of worship, discipleship, and social gospel.

The Right-Brained, Maverick, Creative Church.

Taylor and LaBarre studied maverick companies. These companies did not operate under past assumptions, but rather,

...each company's strategy tends to be as edgy as it is enduring, as disruptive as it is distinctive, as timely as it is timeless.¹²¹

Maverick companies choose to go a different route, knowing that risk is part of growth, and failure part of success. Maverick churches are not opposed to looking outside the

¹¹⁹ Wigger, 48-49.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 56.

¹²¹ William C. Taylor and Polly LaBarre, *Mavericks at Work, Why the Most Original Minds in Business Win* (New York: Harper, 2008), 9.

norms for problem solving, and they are not opposed to innovation. A right-brained, creative, maverick church takes the artists and the risk-takers and puts them together at the front of the transformation process. This combination will seem chaotic and unstructured at times, but it is what will drive the church forward into the unknown but hopeful future.

The current structure of the United Methodist Church must be willing to see risky behavior as growth and creative ventures as the healthy core. It must provide the support needed for the risks and for the creativity, and at the same time provide the freedom for possibilities to come from unknown and misunderstood sources. The creative maverick church leans into the unknown with the joy of riding a roller coaster: sure the thrill will end, but experiencing the delight in the moment of fear. It is counterintuitive to be right-brained, creative and maverick when in severe decline. But this kind of church structure and local church community will allow for a resurrection.

Taylor and Labarre encourage organizations to promote extracurricular activities in their workers because, according to Wieden, “creativity is basically subversive in nature.”¹²² Creative ideas come out of a position of play and rest and not from stress and overwork. Pastors and leaders need to learn to grow in the extra things of life: in fun activities with family, in regular periods of rest, in hobbies, new habits, and exploration. Having more fun is the work of the creative soul.

An example of a right-brained, creative, maverick church is shown in “Planting a Garden,” by McCoy.¹²³ This church meets in a dinner theatre, worships around tables where food is provided, utilizes film, video, and secular songs, and fully employs creative

¹²² William C. Taylor & Polly Labarre, 122.

¹²³ Linda S. McCoy, *Planting a Garden, Growing the Church Beyond Traditional Models* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2005).

persons in the process of forming worship services. They reach a group who are not normally drawn to church. They form communities online, and they are involved in global mission and local transformation. Almost everything they do is ground-breaking for a United Methodist congregation. The church needs to witness to the change that occurs in these creative, risk-taking congregations.

Sweet compares the creativity needed in the church world to the arena of music:

Inside every successful organization there is a musical score for innovation. And every score has three key musicians: the composer (the idea person), the conductor (the creative people and others who believe in the idea and put their reputation on the line for it) and the orchestra (the people who actually implement the idea and make it better).¹²⁴

In this metaphor the various roles encompass both right-brained and left-brained activities. It shows the value of the full house of God, including the unique gifts of a variety of individuals.

Recently I attended Calvary Chapel in Boise, Idaho¹²⁵. The lead pastor was getting ready to move into retirement, and before he handed the reins over to the person that had been trained to follow him, he decided to do the hard work of transforming his church from the traditional, Boomer format to one that would reach out to younger generations. And so he changed the worship music to a style that was current, handing out earplugs to the elderly persons who desired them as they walked in the door. He took the hit for all the changes that were made, explaining in the worship setting why this transformation was needed and how it was possible.

The week I was there, the artists had transformed the sanctuary and the gathering area. On the walls of the worship space were art pieces. While hearing the opening

¹²⁴ Leonard Sweet, *Summoned to Lead* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 165.

¹²⁵ www.ccboise.org. Attended in August, 2011.

songs, I walked around the worship center, soaking in the art and the gospel in the art. Throughout the service, painters were placed in front, on high platforms, and they were working on their painting as the service progressed. The depth of the worship moment was greatly enhanced by the multitude of visual and musical art that reached a place of depth in my soul. As we left and headed into the restroom, the hallways were also filled with beautiful photographic art. One set of photos was of a mother holding her infant child who had just passed away, and next to it was the father holding the same child. The lighting, the pain-etched faces, and the real tears touched the very spot of my greatest pain, the loss of an infant daughter. In between these two pictures was a written explanation of their story, and a plea to give them space and time without questions as they begin the healing process. In response, my heart was deeply and inexplicably moved. I pulled out my iPhone and took a picture of these pictures so I could remember how God touched me that day. I remember being moved by the sermon, but the photos connected me directly with my loving Creator. Art is the most underutilized tool in the church. And it is the venue that can provide the greatest chance for an encounter with the Divine.

With every period of change, there is a need to take caution. The tendency with any transformation is that the system begins to worship the new way of being, instead of the God of the new thing. This is true even of this proposed form of church. Kimball calls the church to be sure of its choices:

I pray that after a worship gathering, we will lie in bed at night, not thinking about the creative art and prayer stations we set up, but thinking about the people we saw kneel in worship and prayer at the stations. I pray that in our communities we will not be known simply as churches of creativity and innovation. Instead,

may the emerging church be known as a worshipping church, a serving and selfless church, a holy church, and a church of love and grace.¹²⁶

Today change is greatly needed, and the transformation is in process. This change, however, will one day give way to another change, another understanding of how to be the Church in the world. The ongoing process of transformation will keep the Church in the leaning position: leaning on the wisdom and guidance of the God who makes all things new for each season and time.

Change Happens from the Edge

The change needed for the church to live into its present future will not come from the current center of power. History has proven that change happens from the edges of societies and organizations. Weems, a United Methodist consultant, describes the year 1776, in which the Methodist movement represented only 2.5% of American population¹²⁷. Most of the nation were Episcopalian, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian. The Methodists were uneducated, and in fact, none of the Methodist clergy had obtained a college degree. The noted Lyman Beecher, at a gathering associated with an 1814 Yale commencement, was known to have said,

Illiterate men have never been the chosen instruments of God to build up his cause.¹²⁸

This is not the case for Methodists. While the Methodists were uneducated, their passion was beginning to set the nation on fire for the gospel of Christ.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship*, 230-231.

¹²⁷ Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 72.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 72.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 71-73.

The history of the Methodist then moved to a time where it became the center of society. President Lincoln noticed the importance of this body, and stated in a letter to Dr. Moody,

While all churches are important...it may fairly be said that the Methodist Episcopal Church...is, by its greater numbers, the most important of all.¹³⁰

The growth continued until, in the nineteenth century, Methodism was the largest Protestant denomination in America. All this came with indicators of rising clergy salaries, rising costs of building buildings, and an over abundance of pipe organs.¹³¹

Many of the current clergy inherited a church that had been central to American society.

However, today the Church finds herself relegated to the edges of society again. Over a decade ago, Weems calls for the church to lead from both the center and the edge. He states that this is the best reflection of the New Testament reality.¹³² However, when recounting the story of the beginning of the American Methodist movement, he states,

*When relegated to the margins, leading from the edge is the only option.*¹³³

He also recalls that Francis Asbury proclaimed often that Methodists “must draw resources from {the} centre to {the} circumference.”¹³⁴ This was necessary in order to continue to maintain a fresh faith of the people. While Weems calls for the “both/and” of working for change from the center and the edge¹³⁵, this statement was made eleven years ago. Since then, the decline has continued. Today the change needed is a change from the edge, as was the case in the original days of the movement.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 75.

¹³¹ Ibid, 74-76.

¹³² Weems, 79.

¹³³ Ibid, 72.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 73.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 80.

While current power structures may call for change, plan for change, and empower change agents, in the end the structural upheaval that occurs will be fought by those who benefit from the current way of operating. This necessitates that change come from the edges of organizations, and sometimes even from outside an organization. The place of power is not typically the place of change. Godin states,

Heretics are the new leaders. The ones who challenge the status quo, who get out in front of their tribes, who create movements.¹³⁶

Those who challenge the status quo end up on the edges of their organizations. What is needed is a church revolution from the edge. An edge revolution relies on those who have been pushed to the edge, who have not been heard, who have been paid to be silent, or who have chosen to stand at the edge, in hopes of a moment to leap out of the structure. Kissling says,

I think that change comes at the margins. I've always believed that. People in the center are not going to be the big change makers. You've got to put yourself at the margins and be willing to risk in order to make change.¹³⁷

These edge people are the ones who notice what is going on in the periphery of the church and in the center of society. Because their focus is not centered in the current church structure, they have keen eyes for things around the church, and even things not-of the church. The only change that comes from the "inside" is when a former insider has been pushed to the edge. These are people who are barely "in." These are those whose voices are too passionate, too different, and too risky. They are the ones that have the least to lose and the most to gain by change. Sometimes the risky edgers appear to be

¹³⁶ Seth Godin, *Tribes*, 11.

¹³⁷ *On Being Blog*, "Change Happens on the Margins: Moses Wright and the Dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, by Nancy Rosenbaum. <http://blog.onbeing.org/post/2793924256/change-happens-on-the-margins-moses-wright-and>. Accessed December 9, 2011.

within the organization, but if you look closely, it is apparent that they are just biding their time till the change happens.

Change is typically seen as destabilizing, but Tickle describes the change in the church as the stabilizing factor,

In the Great Emergence, reacting Christians are the ballast. However unattractive they may seem to be to other of their fellow Christians and however unattractive nonreacting Christians may seem to be to them, the small, outer percentage is the Great Emergence's ballast; and its function is as necessary and central to the success of this upheaval as is any other part of it.¹³⁸

If the church chose to ignore the revolutionaries, or the reactionaries, it could end up caving in to a life in the past. Understanding the role of the people on the edge as a healthy aspect of the institution can help the whole church hear what is most difficult to receive.

Jesus was on the edge of his church institution. He was frequently challenged by those in power, the Pharisees, and he often spoke words of correction that placed him on the outskirts of religious understanding. When Jesus allowed his disciples to pick wheat on the Sabbath, and healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, the Pharisees challenged him. Jesus responded,

Who among you has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath and will not take hold of it and pull it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! So the Law allows a person to do what is good on the Sabbath.¹³⁹

Jesus challenged the common understanding of the Sabbath, and then healed the man's hand in front of them. The Pharisees were so distraught by this turn on tradition that the scriptures report, "The Pharisees went out and met in order to find a way to destroy

¹³⁸ Phyllis Tickle, 138.

¹³⁹ Matthew 12:11-12.

Jesus.”¹⁴⁰ Jesus called for change and faced death, all the while believing in the resurrection power of the Father who loved him absolutely. He knew that life rose out of death, even the life of the church.

Hirsch believes that “the battle for Christianity in the West will be worked out in America...”¹⁴¹ He makes this statement even though he is not an American. He believes that so strongly that he left his home in Australia to come to America:

And so, I have left kith and kin and come to America to help awaken the sleeping giant of God’s people.¹⁴²

Hirsch believes that what happens in this part of the world can effect many parts of the world. Tickle declares:

If in pursuing this line of exegesis, the Great Emergence really does what most of its observers think it will, it will rewrite Christian theology—and thereby North American culture—into something far more Jewish, more paradoxical, more narrative, and more mystical than anything the Church has had for the last seventeen or eighteen hundred years.¹⁴³

And, while American Christianity is not the only influencing factor in the world, it is one of great importance.

CONCLUSION

What then must the Church do? How then can the Church imagine delaying the inevitability of change and transformation, of death and resurrection, of becoming creative and maverick, of failing and rising again? Is not this the time for a Jesus insurgency to rise up from the edges?

¹⁴⁰ Matthew 12:14.

¹⁴¹ Hirsch and Ford, *Right Here Right Now*, 236.

¹⁴² *ibid*, 236.

¹⁴³ Phyllis Tickle, 162.

Right now there is a church revolution going on. It can be heard in the voices of those who have been silenced, in the actions of those who work against the status quo, and in the rising groundswell of discontent within the clergy and lay leaders of the church. It is not hard to hear this Jesus Insurgency from within. It is coming soon...for it has already begun. This church transformation will include the qualities of a right-brained, maverick, and creative form, and it has begun on the edge. What must be remembered as the church begins to rise up to a new life is that those who fought for systemic change will, in time, be the ones who are in power. And then there will be a new death, and a new rising, and a new revolution. This process of life goes on, is alive, and is eternal. The Scripture reminds us of this:

Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?
I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.¹⁴⁴

The Church is ripe for the new thing, the path that leads it out of the desert and away from the wilderness. This new thing will occur when death caves in to life; when a simple support structure is built; when the church transformation is both revolutionary and insurgent; and when the new creative and maverick churches rise up from the edges of the current system. Now is the time for the rebirth from the edge to create life.

In order to fully understand this change from the edge of the church, the artifact, *Jesus Insurgency, The Church Revolution from the Edge*, by Dottie Escobedo-Frank and Rudy Rasmus, will provide a format for wider readership.

¹⁴⁴ Isaiah 43:19, (*Common English Bible*).

SECTION FIVE:

ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

The book is centered in the setting of the UMC, however will also speak into the mainline church as a whole. The chapters in *Jesus Insurgency*, *The Church Revolution from the Edge*, are as follows:

Chapter One: At the Crossroads, written by Dottie Escobedo-Frank

This section describes the crossroad the church is at. It describes the state of death and decline, provides statistics and trends, and proposes that this death will come with the hope of resurrection.

Chapter Two: The Insurgent, written by Rudy Rasmus

This section describes the nature and role of an insurgent, calling church leaders to take on this role in order to rise up from the places where death lives. This calls for a Jesus Insurgency to change the church.

Chapter Three: The Church Revolution, written by Rudy Rasmus

This section describes the role of the revolution and the revolutionary. It speaks to the need for action and commitment to changing and growing as a new kind of follower of Jesus Christ.

Chapter Four: From the Edge, written by Dottie Escobedo-Frank

This chapter purports that this change is happening already on the edges of the church leadership. It will not happen from the center of the current hierarchy, but it will happen from the edge.

Jesus Insurgency will be in a voice that speaks to laity, pastors, and denominational leaders. And it will speak to those who are ready to give up, those who

are on the edge of the church, and those who are hoping for a new way to live as Christ's church in today's world. It critiques The Call to Action of The United Methodist Church as a solution to the current state, and calls the Church forward into a deeper solution. It calls for a rising up of the new thing.

SECTION SIX:

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

BOOK PROPOSAL

The title is *Jesus Insurgency, The Church Revolution from the Edge*. It is co-authored by the student, and Rudy Rasmus, pastor of St. John's UMC in Houston, Texas. It was published by Abingdon Press as an eBook in December 2011, and will be published as hard copy by March 2012.

ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

The book will speak to churches and mainline denominations that are addressing the need for change. It will also be one book of many that will address "The Call to Action" of The United Methodist Church.

The marketing will be completed by Abingdon Press.

SECTION SEVEN:

POSTSCRIPT

POSTSCRIPT

Jesus Insurgency is just the beginning of a conversation. It is a call for people who are tired of complaining, to stand up and be the body of Christ in their own location. It is a call to stand up to the structures that are killing the church, and to topple them. It is a call to create simple, flexible structures that provide backbone and support. And it is a call for a Jesus insurgency to spark the revolution that can change the world.

But the limitation is that it is a call, a beginning, and not the fullness of a solution. It speaks to what is not working, and what can happen. The next conversation needs to speak to the actual action steps that can move the institution forward. The next conversation needs to provide some implementation ideas. This could include a new method to make disciples of Jesus Christ, a new expression of holiness, and a new understanding of the social gospel. These avenues must be fleshed out for the church and for those who are ready to take some first steps.

Other areas of action need to be proposed. Writers can highlight the “*communitas*” movement, the house-church movement, and the missional-emergent movement. These expressions of the church have some signs of health and possibility for the future. But, there is a bigger area to watch. Society is becoming very spiritual, but they are not seeking their spiritual connections in the church. The church needs to address this, find out where and how they are getting their spiritual needs met, and go there to walk along side and influence this new understanding of faith.

The Call to Action of The United Methodist Church will be voted on in the 2012 General Conference. Whatever the outcome is, the local church will be expected to

implement the structural mandate. How will the local church respond? Options for response must be outlined, so that no matter what happens structurally, the gospel of Jesus Christ must be granted full rein in the world. The message must be taken to the streets, and the message must be heard wherever it can be heard. And for this to happen, the church needs to be willing to be courageous, fearless, and passionate for Jesus Christ and for the true work of the church. The church must not be distracted by the current state of affairs, but must focus on the stated United Methodist task of *making disciples for the transformation of the world*.

This is just the beginning. Let the greater work begin.

SECTION EIGHT:

ARTIFACT

ARTIFACT

JESUS INSURGENCY, The Church Revolution from the Edge

by Dottie Escobedo-Frank and Rudy Rasmus

(posted separately)

SECTION NINE:

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